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Prese costui—*”



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CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	THROWN OUT	I
II.	SINGULAR ADVENTURE OF CAPTAIN BORMAN	27
III.	THE LINKS	51
IV.	MUSIC AND MOONLIGHT	75
V.	TWO LETTERS	93
VI.	UNDER THE CHESTNUT	125
VII.	THE LUCK OF THE CLOVER PASSED ON	147
VIII.	THE CLOVER MISSING	171
IX.	BLOOD UPON THE CLOVER	192
X.	THE CLOVER RETURNED TO THE GIVER	214

CHAPTER I

THROWN OUT

“The worship the heart lifts above,
And the heavens reject not;
The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow,
The devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow.”

“No, Jack, I cannot share your enthusiasm for Norris Borman, I’m made like that, incapable of adopting other people’s raves.”

“My dear Marcia, when have I deserved this imputation? Is thy servant a schoolmiss that he should get up a rave?”

“Still,” returned Marcia, “you seem to want me to get up a rave. Which is adding insult to injury, if you are too superior to do it yourself.”

“Superior?” echoed Jack, apparently addressing some hazel bushes overhanging a steep-banked road along which the cousins

were leisurely riding in the late winter afternoon. "Well, I *am* blest! She accuses me of being superior and getting up raves, because I happened to say poor old Borman wasn't altogether a bad sort of chap. He rides as straight as a bird. He's got a D.S.O. You've got to deserve a D.S.O., mind you, before you get it."

"No doubt. I don't suppose you or I will ever get a D.S.O., Jack dear, much less deserve it. Still, I decline the rave."

"He's a fine soldier, Marcia."

"It's possible to be a fine soldier and a horrid man."

"You'd best not say that to the governor. Borman's a well-built, distinguished-looking man."

"Still I am heart-whole."

"He has, or will have, very good property."

"Even that doesn't fetch your mercenary cousin."

"He's desperately smitten; he has 'em very bad indeed."

"Still I am calm."

"And it's about time you went in double harness."

“ I go better in single. To confess the solid truth, I was born an old maid, predestined to single blessedness.”

“ Pff! We are all born old maids—that is, young ones, in other words, celibates—and we’re all predestined to the kind of blessedness we like best. But we don’t *all* like what’s best for us because it *is* best, my dear. Now, a single life is a most demoralising thing for a woman. It makes her selfish, stuck-up, opinionated ; besides, old maids are always frumps. The woman was never born who wouldn’t be the better for a husband, even an indifferent one.”

“ I’m not sure that an indifferent husband isn’t the best brand of husband made, after all, Jack. When they’re in love, they are so abominably selfish and exacting and jealous. And they expect you to be an angel, and you can’t. Then it enrages them to find you are made of every-day human stuff ; so they call you a demon and say their lives are blighted, and slang you generally. And if you have the innocentest little friendship with other men they make a tragedy, and hire detectives to shadow you in the hope of driving you

into the Divorce Court, or else they make themselves so ridiculous before those other men that you're ashamed to own them—the husbands, I mean. I don't think you ever get much good comradeship out of an in-love husband. Now, an indifferent one doesn't expect too much. If you flutter out the skimpiest little rag of a virtue, he's delighted ; it has the charm of the unexpected for him. If you do him a kindness—and all good women are kind sometimes, even to husbands—it astonishes him, and he's enchanted. He begins to look upon you almost as a sort of inferior fellow creature ; he tolerates your favourite vices, knowing very well that he can always go one better than you can. Then he's willing to do you a kindness now and then, because he may stand in need of a kindness himself ; he doesn't take it for granted that you are a banking account he may draw upon to any figure of kindness, as the in-love ones do. He doesn't swear at you or knock you about more than he can help, on the principle of devil-worship——”

“ The Lord help you, Marcia ! do you

mean that all good husbands are devil-worshippers?"

"Not quite. I am only showing how useful the principle of devil-worship is in matrimony; it's the spirit of propitiation. Now, if your husband imputes a spice of devilry to you, he takes very good care to keep you in good temper. No need to propitiate an impeccable angel——"

"Upon my soul, I'm not sure that poor old Borman isn't to be congratulated on his escape, after all."

"You may stake your pile on that, Jack dear. The sum of it all is, that an indifferent husband may, with care and the observance of proper conjugal discipline, be turned into a comrade, or even a friend; while an in-love one——"

"Well, *my* wife will have to love and obey me, and put up with my weaknesses."

"Oh! we all know the old-fashioned, hoity-toity, lord and master business of male imaginings. 'Should he upbraid, I'll own that he prevail,' etc. Mrs. Jack is to be half pussy-cat, half angel, wholly donkey, but very pretty and with enough sense to steer

clear of Mr. Jack's angles. How much do you mean to adore her, Jack? Pardon the personality, though I only follow your lead."

"After all, with such a tongue, I'm not sure——"

"That I'm not best in single harness? Just what I have been advancing all the time."

"You seem to have a pretty wide experience of husbands for an unmarried woman of twenty-five, Marcia, I must allow. And you seem to have formed some pretty strong opinions on the subject of marriage."

"Odd, isn't it? Only men used to do that. Now these wretched women are invading every male province, and carrying off all the dear little close boroughs of masculine privilege and naughtiness."

"H'm! There are a few little preserves left to us, after all, dear Marcia. Logical deduction, for instance. Now will you, in the name of virile reason, tell me why you don't like Borman?"

"In the name of feminine common sense, Jack, I don't know. For the life of me I couldn't say. For pity's sake don't indulge

in that stage guffaw. Well, enjoy your little triumph, dear. This is a wail of tears, as Mrs. Gamp so beautifully says, and it's not often we can laugh even at each other's weaknesses : 'I do not like thee, Dr. Fell,
The reason why——'

"*You* cannot tell. Who knows but Fell was a saint ?" interrupted Jack.

"I do. Why, if he'd been a saint, there would have been a reasonable ready-made reason for disliking him at once, worthy Jack, and tradition expressly states that there was only a rhyme."

"But, my esteemed cousin——"

"' Ban, ban, Ca, Caliban,
Has a new master,
Get a new man,'"

she sang to end the controversy.

They trotted on to the wild rhyme in a greyness that was more cloud than dusk, with a little mist besides. Their horses were damp and muddy and anything but fresh, after a day spent at cover-sides listening for a whimper that sometimes became a cry, and was now and then followed by a view holloa and a brief—all too brief—

burst over grey fallow and green pasture, quickly to be checked again. After all, as Marcia said, you don't lose three foxes every day, even if you happen to have a superlatively good mount, a fortune that seldom befell her, unless, as in this instance, she was staying at Youngwoods, where a generous uncle kept a hunter at her disposal, practically her own.

Winding along the lanes in this easy fashion, under a pearl-grey sky, broken into clear green spaces of chrysoprase and changing masses of warmly-coloured cloud at the west, by cottage and farm and rolling upland, in mild still air scented by wood-smoke, when one is just tired enough to have a valid excuse for indolence, with nerves soothed and blood refreshed by long hours in the open air, is pleasant and restful, conducive to tranquil meditation and golden daydream. In their case movement without perceptible effort and companionship without need of speech increased the charm; the horses' slow trot, often lapsing to a walk, induced a pleasant drowsiness made rhythmic by the regular beat of iron feet. Jack would have whistled,

but that it seemed a sin to break the charm of faint country sounds—here a sheep-bell, there the caw of homing rooks, here the clatter of pigeon wings from a roadside copse. Marcia loved the glamour at the close of this grey winter day ; she watched the soft tints change and fade in the west, the warmth of harmonious greys grow upon the uplands, and the charm of sky and earth deepen with deepening shadows.

Trot-trot, click-clack, went the horses' feet on the firm moist roads ; the brooding mystery of shadowy brown woods and shadowy wide fields grew and grew till she sighed for pure content of heart. Often she had known the pleasure of this homeward ride from the hunting field, often enjoyed the almost voluptuous ease of healthy, open-air fatigue, and the tranquillity of dreamy thought it brings ; but to-night it was more : she had that sudden sense of well-being which may only mean that for once mind and body and circumstance have fair play and just balance, without a nerve or a thought ajar, or perhaps, as imaginative natures assume, the foreshadowing of some

exquisite joy's approach ; such a state of well-tuned being as invests everything with delight, and makes the dance of dead leaf, the scent of fallow fields and mossy woods, a band of silver light along the sky, a solitary figure in the dusked road, a cottage dark against the sky, a forge sending a stream of ruddy radiance from its blackness with melodious clink-clink upon the anvil, evocative of poignant pleasure that is almost pain.

Yonder village, red-windowed and still, its grey tower looming vaguely above dark-massed trees, was a joy to see ; those sheep on the slope, their coats warm in the faint after-glow, and those peaceful, half-seen cows nibbling juicy pasture, what magical charm in them ! And this heavy, lumbering waggon rolling ponderously in the lantern-gleam behind sedate, slow-stepping horses with nodding heads and fringed pasterns, how good it was to see, how good the scent of its load of faint-rustling straw, how friendly and cheery the good-night of the men stamping by ! Even the momentary twitter of wakened birds in hedgerows and the scurry of rabbits at play yonder at the copse-edge gave plea-

sure. The cousins had not spoken for miles ; each was grateful to the other for the charmed silence. Yet, pleasant as the ride was, it was equally pleasant to be nearing home under familiar elm-boughs, and to catch a gleam of light from the windows of Youngwoods, beyond the lime avenue and beneath those first pale stars that hold all the charm and mystery of night in their shining glances.

Marcia was imaginative enough to believe this keen sensitiveness to pleasure and the magic of nature boded good, and gave a little cry of delight at the apparition between tree-tops of a thin gold sickle in the violet glamour of the western sky.

“Over the right shoulder, Jack, and turn your money for luck,” she said.

“And kiss a maid,” he thought ; adding aloud, “There’s something else to make the luck complete,” while bending from his saddle for the ceremony, which was received with neutral calm, and the observation that relations could hardly count, when the horses, cheered by the near prospect of stables and corn, broke into a smart trot till the ivied gables of the Grange loomed against the sky

on their right, and Jack opened the gate with his hunting-crop, and Marcia passed through and trotted up the avenue to the porch door, whence a homelike glow streamed over the gravel and sent ruddy reflections dancing in the laurels.

"How awfully jolly it has been," said Jack, handing her down.

"Awfully," she replied, preceding him into the hall. "Nothing like being thrown out. I was once in at the death, Jack. Heaven grant I never do that again. It made me ill for a month. Why, it was worse than shooting droves of poor innocent, helpless birds. The hounds were so horrid, cowardly brutes! and the fox took such a lot of killing,"

"Still," returned Jack, laying his hat and whip aside, "there's a certain amount of satisfaction at being in at the death sometimes. One can't always lose foxes without feeling a want of completeness, a sense of something left to be desired."

The hall was cosy and homelike, with a table drawn up before a bright fire, and screens and well-padded lounges invitingly grouped about. A hanging lamp threw a soft but

hardly sufficient light on the region about the fireplace, and cast many shadows, fitfully dispelled by leaping flames, on wall and staircase. Hot cakes and tea appeared as if by magic; Marcia stood up in the full light, looking at their refection with some jesting assent to her cousin's recommendation to break her fast before a dinner still an hour distant.

Tall, with the grace of a slender shape and long limbs well brought out by her riding-suit, her hat carelessly dashed aside and hair roughened and disarranged by the day's ride, her skirt splashed with mud, a bunch of violets fading in her coat, and arms wearily flung out in the languor of relaxed tension, she scarcely made so pleasant and harmonious a picture as when riding Rob Roy along the lanes with an easy seat and light hand; yet glowing cheeks, shining eyes, and laughing lips, that could be full of pain, were eloquent of health and thought, and the sway of the supple figure was not without power.

The Squire had come in an hour ago and was in the library, the servant said in reply to questions; Mrs. Tyndall was in the drawing-

room, Captain Borman and Mr. Cecil in the billiard-room; Miss Tyndall—the man's recital was interrupted by a light laugh, as a figure emerged from the shadow of a screened lounge, and Mab, sweet and smiling, with the faintest tinge of confusion in the angel face that was found so fascinating by many, announced that here in sober sooth was Miss Tyndall, rejoicing to find her cousin and brother safe at home and sound of wind and limb.

More slowly from the same shadows issued a tall form, with a strong bronzed face on which sat some such cloudy confusion as honest faces can express without loss of self-respect. A cycling costume connected him with an unfamiliar bicycle the cousins had seen gleaming outside the door by the laurels ; the close-cropped head, clean-shaven face with dark moustache, the erect carriage and level glance, bespoke the man of arms.

“ Hulloa, it's Beaumont,” cried Jack ; “ why, Beau, where in the world did you come from ? How are you ? ”

“ Major Beaumont cycled over from Barming this afternoon and overtook us on the way

home," Mab explained. "Marcia, may I introduce our old friend—why, what's the matter?"

The healthy hue had died from Marcia's quivering face, the laughing lips were white, the deep eyes lustrous; she looked as if she were trying to speak but could not—as if in a dream. Yet Beaumont's was neither the face nor the manner to turn gazers to stone; his dark keen glance was gentle and liquid, his bearing courteous and kind, his voice pleasant. Seeing Marcia sway where she stood on the other side of the table, he came quickly from behind Mabel to help her; but before he could reach her she had collapsed and sunk upon the floor at his feet.

In the days of our grandfathers it was part of every gentleman's education to know how to act in such emergencies, as it was equally part of every gentlewoman's training to be able to produce such situations at a moment's notice; but in these degenerate days the practice of swooning has fallen into such disuse that neither Jack, nor Beaumont, nor the servant, had the faintest idea what to do for about five seconds, when the Major, with

the promptitude and gallantry to be expected of one of his profession, gathered the unconscious form up in his capable arms and laid her with care her full length on a lounge, while Mab flew for her mother, and the butler, at Beaumont's command, ran for brandy, and Jack stared aghast with his hands in his pockets, until the restoratives, human and otherwise, arrived.

"I never knew Marcia taken like that in my life before," Jack said afterwards. "I ought to have got her a cup of tea somewhere, or made her take a sandwich and a sip of sherry on the road. Girls are so foolhardy: they will try to do as men do, and can't."

"I never care to see ladies in the hunting-field," Beaumont rejoined; "they are better at home."

"It depends upon where one happens to be oneself," Jack said, pondering upon the evident satisfaction Beaumont had derived from Mab's remaining at home that afternoon and the nature of the conversation unintentionally interrupted by himself and Marcia. Jack sometimes wondered, as brothers will, what particular refreshment male fellow

creatures found in prolonged *tête-à-tête* interviews with his pretty sister.

It was not unusual to discover this young damsel delighting the male intellect in this way and upon this very spot; the ill-natured had been known to advance the proposition that the hall at Youngwoods was specially arranged with a view to the furtherance of such intellectual converse *à deux*, whence the profane vulgar were carefully excluded by the disposition of screens, shadows, and such material adjuncts to the flow of soul. The sight of a guileless face with perfectly-cut features and innocent appealing eyes, emerging from the shadow of a settle, a screen, a palm or a press, and followed by a more or less sheepish-looking male countenance, was a familiar one to Jack; nor was the artless explanation, "Mr. This, or Captain That, dropped in to tea just now and has been telling me all about the Club Theatricals, the Hunt Ball, the Militia Dance," entirely novel or unexpected to Mr. Tyndall. Had he not been a brother he would have known that the pure profile, the smile of infantile candour, the appealing

glance of the blue eyes alone, without the curiously receptive attitude of thought and speech, the exquisitely modelled figure and the delicate colouring, were sufficient to hold "great kings and warriors tall," much less everyday humanity, captive.

Marcia sometimes called her "La Belle Dame sans Merci," which made guileless Mabel smile a sad little smile and say, plaintively: "I never flirt, I never flirted in my life; I don't know how. Don't be spiteful, Marcie dear."

So when Jack Tyndall observed the manly blush upon the features of his friend and the bland serenity upon his angelic sister's on their sudden emergence from the shadows, a kind feeling prompted him to say to himself, "Poor old Beau!" though Beaumont's appearance betokened neither age nor poverty, and to compute to himself the occasions on which the Belle Dame and the warrior tall had probably met before this present. Upon computation these were found to be few, and guessed to have been effective.

"What in the world made you go off like that, frightening people into fits?" La Belle

Dame inquired tenderly of Marcia upon the latter's recovery. "And why in the world did you say 'It is not a dream' to Major Beaumont when you opened your eyes?"

"Perhaps," returned Marcia slowly, after some consideration, "I said it because I meant it."

"But what is the sense of telling people that things are not dreams," persisted Mab, "when they know it very well already?"

"Do they? I don't always know whether things are dreams or realities," returned Marcia, who was still very white and tremulous. "But I do know that I want to lie still by the fire for half an hour before I dress."

She wanted it very badly; so badly that, as soon as Mabel left her, she sprang from the sofa at the foot of her bed and carefully locked her door, and then flung herself face downward among the cushions with her loosened hair tumbling about her shoulders and sweeping the hearth-rug in the fire light.

But in spite of this, she was the first to appear in the drawing-room, where she was soon joined by the Squire, who took her by

the hands and looked thoughtfully at her for a minute.

“What made you faint, my dear?” he asked, without waiting for an answer, “and what a pretty gown you have on! I remember your mother in those pearls. You become them well.”

“I believe they are worth something. I’m often tempted to take them to my uncle’s—towards quarter-day,” she replied.

“That’s her favourite frock,” commented Mab, who had entered, herself in unusually sumptuous array; “it means mischief.”

Major Beaumont, having been prevailed upon to dine and sleep at the Grange, had, by some curious magic of his own, conjured suitable attire from Barming, and thus appeared, to every one’s surprise, speckless and without fault before the eyes of the Belle Dame sans Merci, who smiled pensively and silently drew her conclusions from the gallant gentleman’s correct costume, musing upon a vassal cyclist, whom she had observed that afternoon hovering in the distance and in possible attendance upon the Major. At some signal that cyclist must have sped to

Barming for a parcel that might be conveyed with swiftness as of thought or desire to Youngwoods ten minutes before the dinner hour. How marvellous is this modern device of wheeled humanity swiftly rotating, how many are the purposes to which it may serve, of peace, of war, of love! Even the winged boy with the bow and arrows may not scorn the rapid wheel to effect the swift entrance and exits for which he has ever been renowned. These reflections lit a placid radiance in Miss Tyndall's face without detracting from its beauty.

Marcia, raising her head at the entrance of the fitly apparelled Beaumont, with a flash of surprise in her eyes, and an expression of controlled agitation in her face, looked straight at him, as if she were forcing herself to something difficult and daring and determined not to quail.

He appeared surprised, even slightly embarrassed at sight of her, but easily accounted for that by some civil and natural hope that her indisposition had entirely passed away.

“Please let me forget my bad behaviour,” she faltered; “it was the sudden warmth

after the cool night air and the long day's ride. I am afraid I was a horrid nuisance."

"On the contrary—greatest pleasure—glad to be of any service," returned Beaumont, with blundering civility.

"Major Beaumont knows that he is much to be envied, Miss Ludlow," said a low and velvety voice at her ear, on which Marcia turned to dart an impatient glance at a fair man with colourless hair and moustache and cold blue eyes, who had glided in unperceived and observed the changes in her face and the slight embarrassment in Beaumont's.

"There is something behind all this," he was thinking. "Those two have met before. Why do they pose as strangers?"

"Do you mean to say Tyndall," he asked afterwards of Jack, "that your cousin suddenly fainted for nothing, without any warning whatever?"

"Isn't that the correct way? I noticed nothing before except that my sister and Beaumont started up suddenly out of the shadow. That kind of thing gives one a shock, don't you know, suddenly seeing people when you think there's no one there

—not that we had been saying anything we didn't want heard, though such old chums as we are often do—there's a creepiness about it. So I was not thinking of Marcia at all, and Mabel was introducing Beaumont to her, when I heard a crash, and there was my cousin all in a heap on the floor. We were too flabbergasted to do anything for her—Mab and I. Beaumont had the sense to pick the poor girl up and lay her comfortably on a couch. He seemed to know all about it."

Borman looked thoughtfully at Jack for a second; "She might have hurt herself seriously coming down with a crash like that," he said, "might have hit her head against the table, don't you know. So Beaumont knows all about fainting ladies, eh? Kind of man women admire. Very old friend, isn't he?"

"Old Beau is a Wykehamist. We were at Winchester together. I've known him off and on ever since. Haven't seen him for years."

"Foreign service? India? Africa? Of course. We poor soldiers are like the devil, always going to and fro on the earth and

leaving our girls behind us. Deuced hard lines."

"But the girls won't be left behind nowadays. They trot about as much as the men. Marcia has been in India. She went out to India with her brother, he's in the Artillery, before his marriage."

"Ah! to be sure. Girls do trot about nowadays, especially in India, 'where there ain't no Ten Commandments.' Odd that women always chuck the commandments with their native climate, isn't it?"

The vicar, and his wife and daughter, were dining at the Grange that night, else there was only the house-party and the unexpected cyclist. It was observed that Marcia did not shine that evening, in spite of the favourite gown and the pearls. She sat opposite Mab and her swift-wheeled friend, in both of whom she was so much interested as to play an indifferent part in the dialogue initiated by Borman, who had taken her in and expected more feast of reason and flow of soul than fell to his portion in reward. To make up for this she remembered to snub him two or three times, but in a half-

hearted way, without her usual spirit and dash. Her friends acknowledged that she could administer a thoroughly effective snub, when so minded ; she was herself not unconscious of her skill in this often necessary art. Yet she sometimes brought a green glitter to Captain Borman's eyes and a muttered imprecation between his clenched teeth to-night, also an expression of compassion for him to the face of Major Beaumont, who was neither deaf nor unobservant, even in the magic proximity of the Belle Dame. This lady, despite her tender years, had already discovered the priceless conversational worth of an expressive silence ; she knew how to listen, or appear to listen ; she always, by some happy intuition, said "Yes?" or "Really?" and smiled and looked sweetly sympathetic or discreetly neutral at the proper moment. Therefore, all male persons admired her conversation, while those of her own sex sometimes wondered how she contrived to hold her own in this essential art.

After dinner a thoughtful and dignified rubber of whist was played by the Squire, the Vicar, Mrs. Burton and Marcia. The

young people had some banjos and bones, which Mab kept together with a piano obligato ; they sang appropriate melodies and were merry. Beaumont appeared to enjoy this entertainment, which was not at all to Borman's taste.

Marcia trumped her partner's kings and revoked and played so wildly that she was at last ignominiously expelled from the whist-table, where she was replaced by the heroic self-sacrifice of Norris Borman, who liked "the rigour of the game" and higher points than this simple household could think of without horror. Marcia then immolated herself upon her aunt's backgammon board, playing as if in a dream, thinking, among other things, of the strange surge of delight that had rushed upon her in the magic of the twilight ride home, and of the certain assurance it gave her of the coming of some great happiness. So she had felt on that long-past day when the four-leaved clover had been given her.

CHAPTER II

SINGULAR ADVENTURE OF CAPTAIN BORMAN

“O, had I wist before I kissed
That love had been sae ill to win,
I'd ha' locked my heart in a case o' gowd
And pinned it with a siller pin.”

“As the remembrance of a guest that tarrieth
but a day.”

So Marcia repeated next morning, when the swift wheels that had borne Beaumont to Youngwoods on the preceding afternoon, with equal celerity bore him away again, and only vacancy remained perceptible beneath the over-arching trees leading from the house. She sat in the embrasure of an upper window to witness this departure. She sat there long in the sunshine with wet eyes and a dreamy face, always looking at the interlaced shadows the trees threw upon the grass-edged gravel, seeing more than the

brown, sun-filtered vacancy under the leafless limes, and hearing more than the robin's song and the caw of busy, building rooks. A face with dark eyes, a spare, straight figure, a voice, a laugh, certain words that repeated themselves—such things can fill the mind and furnish food for fancy and reflection for a long, long time.

“A lightsome eye, a soldier's mien,
A feather of the blue,
A doublet of the Lincoln green,
Was all of me you knew, my love,
Was all of me you knew.

“He gave his bridle-reins a shake
Upon the river shore;
Said ‘Adieu for evermore, my love,’
And adieu for evermore.”

So she heard Mabel singing below, while she gathered sprays of red *pyrus japonica* and played with the dogs on the lawn. Last night they had been talking of favourite songs—this among them. Jack was especially fond of “Proud Maisie.” Mabel liked “Adieu for ever more”; and small wonder, since it was a tune her young friends were often set dancing to. Somebody preferred “County Guy.” That must have been

Beaumont ; the man was not without taste. Few men look well on bicycles, especially from the rear ; yet Marcia liked to picture a tall man sitting erect on wheels, and turning, with raised cap, to smile good-bye as he glided swiftly away, like a thought, a dream, a hope.

“ When we cam’ by in Glasgow town,
We were a comely sicht to see ;
My love was clad in black velvet,
And I mysel’ in cramoisie.”

Why are those lines so heart-breaking ? Is it the sorrow of happy things remembered in misery, or the pang of unstilled longing, or both ? They brought tears to Marcia’s eyes.

“ You’ll look us up again before long, Beaumont ? ” the Squire had been heard saying in his hearty voice from the porch, as he gave his parting guest the mighty hand-pressure not every one could brook—“ The pater’s hand-shake is like the bow of Ulysses,” Jack often averred, “ all his friends have to be strong men ”—and a softer voice, charged with singular magnetism, had gladly assented, adding, “ But it can’t be till May or June, unluckily.”

Sometimes May and June seem a very long way off. As yet it was only the end of February.

Marcia took out the four-leaved clover and looked at it through wet eyes in which warm radiance was slowly kindling, and thought and dreamed and remembered for some time longer. Then she put on a hat and veil and stepped lightly down the oak staircase and out to the stables, to see how Rob Roy was faring after his long day's work, and after lunch took part in a bicycle paper-chase with great spirit and energy.

“You soon recovered, Miss Ludlow.” Borman said rather sighingly that evening in the billiard-room. He had observed the rapid mounting of her score, and the vigorous and accurate handling of her cue that caused it, with mixed feelings.

She turned her head quickly, as she stood bending over the table in the act of placing her cue, a graceful posture, suggesting skill and vitality, and looked straightly at him with shining eyes.

“I was not aware I had been ill, Captain Borman,” she said.

The icy tone took effect, but not visibly. "No?" he returned in his soft, low voice, with his gentlest smile; "yet you seemed far from well in the hall last night."

"Did I? And I seem far from ill in the billiard-room to-night," she retorted, as she made a stroke that compelled Jack to dance with admiration and Willoughby, fresh from Rugby, whence an epidemic had sent him before his time, to shout with joy.

"'Pon my Sam, Marcia, you're not so bad for a girl," the latter was good enough to observe.

"Don't you think, Willie dear, you'd better go to bed?" she suggested with a caressing smile. "The dustman's come, darling."

It seemed to Borman that she was visibly relieved and inspirited by the absence of last night's guest; she was not only herself again, but her best, most fascinating self in the reaction from the oppression and terror Beaumont's presence had evidently caused her. What was the secret of it? he still hourly wondered. Beaumont was no *beau sabreur*, no heart-breaking, riding-away

dragoon ; "old Beau" was reckoned a quiet, steady-going fellow, a fine officer, but less popular in messrooms than upon parade grounds. Yet those quiet fellows sometimes go the pace in secret, he reflected ; when they do step over the traces there is mischief and no mistake.

On coming into the hall the night before, he had seen Marcia's white face in a gleam of firelight, as she lay full length on the lounge, Beaumont towering above her, his face in shadow but directed to hers, a singular immobility in his watching posture. These two had never ceased to be conscious of each other's presence, had been unable to meet each other's gaze all the evening long, and, as usual, the man had had the most self-control. It was the same at breakfast next morning. There had been some curious by-play over hot cake and muffin Beaumont had brought her from the fender ; something was dropped and picked up again in a furtive, confused way, something said in low, confused tones. He had no personal knowledge of Beaumont, all was from report and hearsay. Beaumont had

been mentioned in despatches, had won the Distinguished Service Order, and deserved the Victoria Cross, if all were true that men who had served with him reported. That young brute Willoughby was fluent enough on the public part of his life, but quite unable to furnish any private history. Willoughby's tongue had been unloosed by cigars and similar delights, as to the soldier; as to the man, he could be brought to say nothing. As for Jack, nothing could be got out of him. Jack lived chiefly in Temple chambers and dabbled in literature. The Squire was innocent and unsuspicious as a baby. Cecil was an ass. The Belle Dame was truly *sans merci* and *sans* everything but beauty, and the power of using it to the detriment of male mankind.

So this gallant gentleman reflected, as he watched Marcia's unusually brilliant play and the unusual brilliance of her eyes and face, and listened to the tongue whose sharpness he loved and feared equally. To him the crowning charm of a woman was elusiveness; Marcia was always to be won because she never was won. Aphrodite

easily won or—worse still—pursuing, would have gained no golden apple from Paris Borman. After all, the zest of life is the hunter's instinct. Something to chase, to track down, to conquer, to occupy the mind and keep the faculties tense and vibrant, that constitutes happiness.

"Yes, my lady," he thought to himself, while watching the graceful and skilful movements of the billiard-player ; "you may carry that head high, but one day it shall bow to me. You may speak sharp, stinging words now, but one day you shall speak sweetly, tenderly, caressingly to me ; you shall be the suppliant, not I ; you shall hang upon my words and looks, and sigh if I frown and tremble if I swear. You shall come at my beck and go at my word, and know that I am 'dominant master and absolute lord over the soul of one,' and that one my Lady Disdain. You may elude me now, but not for ever."

Lady Disdain felt these thoughts in a vague disquiet, that always affected her under the glance of those intent blue eyes. Cold and cruel eyes, she called them, but Jack main-

tained that they were keen and thoughtful. "The eyes of a great soldier and ruler of men," he averred.

"The eyes of a great bully, and tyrant of women and weak things," she retorted. "Napoleon was both," she added inconsequently; "yet Josephine loved him. Josephine was an invertebrate Creole, a sensual idiot, a Circassian slave, hardly a woman, a sort of female thing."

"She had passion," Jack corrected; "and he had power. Napoleon was one of the greatest of men."

"And he was the scourge of Europe. What a strange worship you have for mere power and ruling capacity, Jack. Oh! your Cromwells and Fredericks and Napoleons! Think of the colossal misery and degradation that brutal, selfish Napoleon caused. Yet you adore him for the great powers he abused to overturn liberty and enslave the civilised world. Great soldiers can be great brutes."

"Therefore poor old Borman could be a great brute if he tried, because he has the stuff of a great soldier in him. You are a strange woman, Marcia, not to admire great

soldiers and strong men. Women do that by instinct."

"Not so strange, Jack. Didn't I always love Wellington? and admire Alexander? How about our own Black Prince and our Indian worthies, our Clives, our Outrams, Havelocks, and Nicholsons? Their scope was small, but they were great soldiers and strong and good men. I love soldiers and I admire strong men."

"But you hate Napoleon and Borman? 'Tis true, 'tis pity, pity 'tis 'tis true; ' for genius is rare, strong character rarer."

"A good heart rarest of all. Give me a man with a heart, Jack."

"So I did once, but you wouldn't have me, *Sans Merci*," he said, with a catch in his voice.

They were walking up and down under the limes in sunshine barred with branch-shadows; Marcia turned her head quickly and looked at Jack's thin, fine-featured face, but he was looking straight before him with an expressionless countenance.

"Oh!" Marcia returned, her momentary anxiety quieted; "that was very long ago, a

very jejune and transitory business, not serious at all, long forgotten."

"Not forgotten, Marcia. Such things leave ineffaceable marks."

"Jack! don't be unkind. We've been such good friends," she cried in a piteous accent. "And I did think——"

"Think what you like, Marcia. We always were and always will be friends. But that was a serious business, and it was the root of our long and pleasant comradeship. Such alliances, unless people are of the same sex, generally have to have some such origin. Goodness knows how I came to 'rake it up to-day. *Pax!*!"

"Nay; but it is not so with true comradeship like ours, Jack, and that other feeling was a temporary aberration of yours. Pray, how many times have you been in love since, Sir Jack? How many heart-breaks have you had? Confess."

"A good few, if all's told. But I never reckon them up. And I hope to have many another before I'm too old or too married. How many has Mab caused? So many or more her brother has had. 'Tis a sad world,

but it has its alleviations after all. There's always somebody to fall hopelessly in love with."

"A Bormanised world, but it has its—ah—Nicholsons, Godfrey de Bouillons, and Cœur de Lions. Jack, I love soldiers, though I've seen and known a good many. In India, for instance, it was almost all men of war, a civilian or two thrown in by way of shadow."

"India," Jack thought, "ah! India. What happened to her then?" "I can't think why you have such an antipathy to poor Borman," he objected.

"Neither can I. There's something in his voice that sets all my bristles up, and something in his look that rouses all my worst passions. Very likely it's my own fault, and the man is not as bad as he seems to me. But he ought to see that I can never do more than tolerate him and so leave me in peace. It's a positive persecution. If he were not leaving next week, I should go away. But I don't want to lose the rest of the hunting if I can help it."

Borman was quite aware of this repugnance, and quite undaunted by it. He

thought a little hatred a very good beginning to build upon ; and he had recently observed a certain look of dread in Marcia's face. "When a woman fears," he was accustomed to say, "she is not far from love." It was considered that he ought to know, if any man ought.

Marcia was coming quite tranquilly home from the village that afternoon, full of some plans she and Mabel had been making with the girls at the Vicarage respecting a play they were to act at Easter. One was to take this part, another that ; would So-and-so care to play at all, if only that *rôle* were assigned him ? Could such a one be brought to take the other part without dire offence ? Such were the serious and perplexing questions agitating the cousins as they stepped along the road and turned in at the gate under the lindens.

" The simplest way," Marcia was saying, " would be to have a series of one-part plays ; then everybody would be satisfied. Amateur theatricals are an immoral amusement ; they create such bitter feeling, such emulations, wrath and rancour. You know you've hated

me like poison, Mab, ever since that leading part I had in the autumn. No wonder strict people prohibit such diversions."

"Oh! but a one-part play would be no play at all; where would the love-making come in? Two-part plays are the thing, Marcie. Leading lady and leading gentleman. Only half the fun would be gone with no one else to flirt with. There must be one leading lady and three leading gentlemen, and call it a quartette. That would be perfectly charming. What a pity Major Beaumont couldn't join us."

"In the quartette? Is he such a good actor?" she asked, stooping to gather a celandine.

"He would be great fun in the quartette. He would be so desperately in love and so desperately injured. That kind of man never wins—at that game. Now Captain Borman carries everything before him with that cool audacity of his, that masterful assumption of superiority."

"Really? I wonder if these men have finished their day's butchering yet? I fancied I heard somebody emptying his gun

awhile back, and—what's that? Something hurt?"

She plunged through a thick shrubbery in the direction whence the sounds seemed to come, paused at the other side to listen and make sure that the piteous shriek sinking to a forlorn whine was that of a dog in great pain. Then she hurried on to the gate of a paddock adjoining the stables. Several small out-buildings abutted on this paddock, the goose-house and some kennels among them. A stream running through the field had been widened and dammed into a pond that was now chiefly mud, the sluices being open. Some tall firs rose on the shrubbery side, and through the stems of these Marcia saw—first, a lad sharpening a bill-hook at the revolving grindstone by the pond, next, the spare figure of Norris Borman in gaiters and shooting-coat, in his hand an iron rod, at his feet a brown setter bleeding, panting and whining more and more feebly under his master's strokes.

"He's had pretty nigh enough, sir," a man from the stables was remonstrating, at the same moment that an indignant attempt to

snatch the rod on the part of the boy at the grindstone was repelled by a savage kick from Borman, whose face was white and ugly, with drawn lips and glittering eyes.

Marcia saw all this in quick glance, saw the face under the tweed cap, the upraised arm, the strong, spare figure outlined partly against the grey sky, partly against the muddy pond fenced with low wooden rails, saw the men coming out from the stable and garden with sullen, indignant looks and mutterings, saw most clearly of all the poor creature bleeding at the brute's feet; then a mist came before her eyes, fire flashed through her veins and her brain, and, before the uplifted arm with the rod again descended on the poor setter—she never knew how—she was there, standing over him, and Borman was gone.

Caught unexpectedly quick and straight between the eyes, he had lurched against the rails behind him, which were rather more than knee high, and went backwards heels over head into the thick pond-mud, catching at the nearest thing, which happened to be one of the geese paddling about the mud-

edges of the pond a few feet below, an action that drew the cackling and hissing indignation of the whole flock upon him. Just then some impish instinct prompted the pretty little donkey at the far end of the paddock to utter a long-drawn, brazen bray, which, added to the combined assaults of the angry geese and the helpless floundering of the gallant officer in the mud, converted a tragic situation to broadest farce and extracted long and loud guffaws from the men, and especially from the boy who had been kicked, and who utterly declined to come to the unfortunate gentleman's rescue or help beat off the geese, the battering wings and hissing beaks of which hid the prostrate man's face, while their paddling feet trampled and bespattered him with mud.

"Let en lie!" shouted the boy, between ecstatic roars of laughter as he danced with delight. "Serve en right! Do en good!"

"What's up now?" asked Willoughby, running up, attracted by the noise and followed by Jack.

"Where's Borman?" asked the latter, not

recognising in the muddy centre of the goose attack an officer of her Majesty's army. "Take those geese off, you idiots ; they'll suffocate the man," he added, rushing to the rescue, himself spluttering with laughter in which Willoughby joined, though at the expense of his idol.

Marcia, hot and trembling, and sobbing with pity and rage, cast but one glance at the prostrate figure struggling in the mud, then, with a grim and bitter smile, turned from him to the poor exhausted setter, telling a man to run for his life for the veterinary surgeon in the village.

"It's the Captain's own dog," was the man's objection, quickly silenced ; the boy was told to get a rug from the stables, the poor dog was then gently placed upon it and so borne by Marcia, Mabel, and one of the shooting guests who came up just then with Cecil, to a warm, light shed in a garden, and soothed and tended till the doctor came.

"It's just like this, Mr. John," Sims, the coachman and factotum, afterwards explained to Jack. "The Cap'en, he said he'd make the dog obey him, and he'd learn him to

shirk his work if he killed the brute. The dog was pretty nigh done, and some was crying shame, when Miss Ludlow came up, and went straight for the Cap'en and knocked him over as clean as a whistle. I never saw anything prettier or straighter done in my life."

"Nonsense, Sims," Jack retorted; "you mean that Captain Borman was startled and missed his footing."

"No nonsense at all, sir, she bowled him over as clean as a whistle. Blow me if she didn't!"

"Then I will certainly blow you, Sims. For I should be sorry for my father or anybody else to take that view of the case."

"Then I'm blowed, Mr. John; for that's another story and thankee, sir," he replied, pocketing half a crown with cheerful acquiescence.

The gallant Captain, intent on executing what he held to be justice on the poor animal, whose fault had roused his brutality, had undoubtedly been startled and taken at a disadvantage by the onset of the lady of his temporary affections. Scarcely had his

eye caught the flutter of ladies' skirts and identified Marcia and Mabel as the wearers, before one lady seemed changed to human lightning flashing between his eyes with the words, "Brute! Oh! brute!" so that he saw stars and felt himself banged up into the sky and whirled face downwards into evil-smelling mud, whence, with a frantic wriggle, he turned himself face upward and mouth full, only to find himself assailed by a flock of hissing geese, the battering of whose strong wings beat out what breath was not exhausted by his futile floundering in the slippery mud.

When at last, the geese being beaten off, and, all breathless and clogged and encumbered with mud and pond-weed, he was helped to his feet and waded to land, to be received with another salvo of laughter from almost every creature on the place, including the Squire, who had come up with the rest of the party, he felt that he cut but a sorry figure

"Before the eyes of ladies and of—friends,"

and his remarks, choked and impeded by mud, were not of an edifying character.

“ What an ad. you’d make for somebody’s soap,” Willoughby cried. “ ‘ He won’t be happy till he gets it,’ and that sort of thing.”

“ Wash him, and hang him up to dry. How many eels are there in his pockets ?” added Cecil. “ ‘ Pray put our Borman again in the pond; poor dear, he may catch us some more !’ ”

“ How the deuce did you get in ?” queried the Squire. “ Trying a mud-bath for rheumatism, eh ? You’d best go into a loose box and have yourself rubbed down with straw and a bucket of warm water, Borman. Fetch him a change of clothes, somebody. ‘ Pon my word, I’m awfully sorry for this. Haw ! haw ! haw ! awfully—haw ! haw !—sorry.’ ”

“ Roll in clean straw, Borman, and don’t play at Narcissus in mud ponds again or go Don Quixoting at flocks of geese. My word ! it is the Charge of the Light Brigade with a vengeance.

“ Geese to the right of him,
Geese to the left of him,
Geese right in front of him,
Cackled and wondered ;
Long shall the tale be told,
Yea, when the wine is old,
How the man floundered.”

“Who’s got a kodak? A snap-shot for the love of heaven! And label it ‘Before using Jones’s soap.’ Never mind, old chap, frogs are awfully nourishing and mud’s warm. He’d make a ripping study for a Fury with those weeds in his back hair—not to speak of the expression of his face—and his language.”

Marcia was somewhat surprised two hours later to see Captain Borman, newly shaven and all speckless in snowy linen, shining studs and glossy cloth, come into the drawing-room erect and cool as ever, though with a harder set of his hard mouth and a fiercer glitter in his keen eyes.

“Gemini, what a man he is! He must have swallowed pints of the beastliest mud and scrunched dozens of frogs, and he hasn’t turned a hair,” Willoughby whispered to her; not knowing her to be the cause of his hero’s disaster, though she had confessed to her uncle with regrets for the breach of hospitality.

“But I’m afraid I should do it again under similar circumstances,” she added. “For indeed, Uncle Harry, I couldn’t help it.

You see you are a woman first and a lady afterwards."

But Uncle Harry, being a mere man, did not see things in this light. Nor did he consider it womanly to knock a man into a mud-pond. He resolutely crushed all subsequent allusions to the gallant Borman's adventure with the geese, and refused to hear any parallel between toad-eating and frog-eating, how best to catch eels, or inuendoes concerning geese as capitol surprises, and could not do enough to show his respect and regard to his injured guest.

In the course of the evening, Marcia, being somewhat withdrawn from the others, was looking for some music near the piano, when, becoming aware that Borman was approaching her in his quiet, unobtrusive way, she looked with defiant eyes straight into his cold blue ones.

"I have to thank you, Miss Ludlow," he said, blandly smiling and daintily balancing a teaspoon on the teacup he held, "for your kind assistance this afternoon."

"Not in the least," she replied steadily; "it is always a pleasure to be of service to people."

"Always," he returned, with an icy smile and pale lightnings in his glance; "so I hope you will do me the honour of accepting the beast you helped me correct as a mark of gratitude. He is quite at your service."

"If you mean the poor setter, it is dead," was the cold rejoinder.

"Really? That *was* kind of you," he murmured, looking thoughtfully at the cup in his hand. "I shall always remember this, Miss Ludlow," he added in a gentle voice, as he turned away. "For I never forget a kindness," he blazed out with a sudden savage glitter in his eyes.

Next morning a note conveyed to the family the information that Captain Borman had received a telegram obliging him to leave by an early train. This he had already done, the telegram, by some happy chance, having found him ready packed and in marching order.

CHAPTER III

THE LINKS

“ Ah, County Guy, the hour is nigh,
The sun has left the lea,
The orange flower perfumes the bower,
The breeze is on the sea ;
The lark, his lay who trilled all day,
Sits hushed his partner nigh ;
Breeze, bird, and flower confess the hour,
But where is County Guy ? ”

DEEPLY shocked and upset by the occurrence in the paddock, Jack Tyndall went so far as to take Mabel to task for allowing Marcia to make such an exhibition of herself—as if the poor *Belle Dame* had not been as much surprised as any one, and a good deal more horrified than many, by the incident.

“ Why, she called him names before the men. I was ready to sink into the ground. She always does what she likes, never what other people do. She is so thoughtless and

selfish, one can never make her out. Do you suppose I enjoyed the exhibition?" his sister replied, with a strong sense of injury.

"You see, Marcia, what comes of letting your angry passions rise," was his reproach to his cousin. "You begin by indulging in a causeless dislike for a man, and you end by carrying your feelings into expression by personal violence like—ah—like—a street boy."

"Ah! I've cried *peccavi* often enough, Jack. I own that my conduct was not exactly conventional."

"Not quite—why, you hit him between the eyes and knocked him down—and called him every name you could think of. An unreasonable and prejudiced dislike is one thing, but such loss of self-respect as personal violence——"

"Dislike had nothing to do with it. I cannot see cruelty, I cannot see helpless creatures savagely treated without boiling blood and hot indignation; torture and oppression make me literally mad. If I had loved the man I should have done the same

thing, I am positive. But I could never love a cruel brute like that Borman."

" My dear, you ought never to have seen such a thing. Borman would never have thrashed his dog before you. You were not present, but you must needs rush in. Girls should not interfere with men's affairs. Dogs must be disciplined, especially sporting dogs. The beast had misbehaved, he had to be thrashed. Why, we all know what ill-behaved, useless curs women's dogs become simply because they are not properly thrashed."

" Jack," cried Marcia, turning white, "if I saw *you* treat a dog like that, I'd never speak to you again, never. You can't have seen the poor creature ; it makes me sick to think of it. It had to be killed. Oh ! I am glad I knocked him into the pond, the brute ! I'm glad I called him what he was, glad I made him the laughing-stock of the place."

" Ah ! but you made him something else, my dear, and you'll live to repent it. Borman is a strong man ; he has a strong man's faults ; he is a stern man and occasionally

cruel. He is loyal and just, and he never forgets. He is vindictive ; it doesn't do to make an enemy of such a man."

"I shall never repent it. I'd rather he were my enemy than my friend. You should have seen the look of gratitude in the poor dog's eyes—his eye—for the other—oh that I had broken the brute's bones !—I saved the poor setter further torture and had him put very gently to sleep, and I am glad, glad, glad. Don't let us quarrel, Jack dear, as we certainly shall if you defend the brute's treatment of that poor dog. *Pax.*"

Pax it was, though subsequent relations between the cousins were somewhat strained ; Jack strongly objecting to hear his friend referred to as "the brute," and returning to his chambers sooner than he had intended in consequence of this objection.

But though he lost some hunting and Marcia's companionship, he did not lose the remembrance of Norris Borman's singular encounter with the geese, which followed him everywhere in many versions more or less embellished.

It was "What was that story about Borman and the geese?—Didn't some woman give Borman a facer and duck him in a horse-pond?"

Perhaps Cecil Tyndall may have told it in some club or messroom; he was not a great admirer of Norris Borman, and regarded his cousin's action as spirited and just. It was certainly he who regaled Beaumont with a not unvarnished description of the affray, to the great scandal of the latter, who seemed to think Marcia's part in it beyond defence.

"No doubt Borman was a brute," he commented. "I scarcely know the man: he has a nasty look about the mouth. He ought to have been knocked down—but by a woman! Where were the men? Miss Ludlow struck Borman in the face? She was there at the stables? A pity! One likes a woman to be a woman."

"My cousin is a woman all over," retorted Cecil. "If you knew her as we at Youngwoods do, you would be the first to say so. She rides well and pluckily, and plays billiards as few women can; but there's nothing mannish or fast or unfeminine about

her. Yet she has knocked about the world a good deal and has no settled home. She lost her people early."

"Was she brought up with your sister? No? Miss Tyndall is so exquisitely feminine and gentle, it would be a liberal education to any girl to live with her."

"Very liberal," Cecil thought. "Marcia has the most heart of the two," he added, remembering how she had nursed him once through a long illness, when Mabel fled in terror.

Marcia's visit to Youngwoods ended rather suddenly, another uncle wanting her to go to Rome and Florence with him for the spring, so that she did not see the ivied gables of Youngwoods again until the may was in flower and the great climbing *Gloire de Dijon* on the south front was a mass of deep-hearted roses.

She liked the country at this season and especially liked Youngwoods, it was the most homelike house she had ever known; she found a subtle charm in the soft unfolding and frequent delayings of the English spring, a charm much enhanced by the earlier and more luxuriant beauty of the spring she had just enjoyed in Italy.

Youngwoods lay on a small tableland, protected on the north and east by downs, and looking south to the sea, which caught and reflected all the sunshine, and breathed soft yet vivifying airs, sometimes rising to roaring south-west gales, upon it. Its linden avenue was now in freshest fulness of green leafage; the meadows near were flooded with golden glory of buttercups, among which tall cowslips were fading in the daily deepening sun; many a thorn hedge, thickly matted with yellow and green lichen, was now whitened by broad patches of sweet may-bloom, and many a storm-writhen tree laden with the same snowy fragrance. Gorse spread lavish gold bloom along the slopes and hollows of the downs, dog-violets were blue in woods and upon hedge-banks, where the more delicate blueness of speedwells reflected the pure clarity of May skies. Hyacinths made sheets of still deeper blue in Nutcombe Woods, where the rank odour of wild garlic sometimes offered a contrast to their faint but penetrating perfume, or sweet woodruff spread white and aromatic over the mossy earth. Orchards were gay with fast-fading

apple-bloom; sheaves and sheets of tulip and narcissus were mixed with endless variety of old-fashioned perennials and flowering shrubs in cottage gardens.

Marcia thought, as she rolled tranquilly along the pleasant country roads, that there was no such luxuriance of bloom anywhere as round about Youngwoods; her heart leapt with keen pleasure when the ivied gables peeped above the paler green of the lime-trees, and she thought how pleasant it would be to have some such home to shelter in and call her own. Then she drew a long, long sigh, reflecting that this might never be, and feeling the wideness and weariness of the world for a woman who is solitary.

"If I had at least to earn my living," she mused, as she acknowledged the curtsey of a woman standing at a cottage door, waist-deep in flowers. "But to live a superfluous entity at Youngwoods, not even the daughter of the house. No, thank you. If my Uncle Harry needed me or my Aunt Janet could not do without me. But they are both hale and active and self-sufficing. When Mab marries, perhaps—but she never will. She couldn't

keep to one man for more than a month at a time. I'll have a bachelor flat in town. 'So heigh ! ho ! the green holly, This life is most jolly.' "

The carriage rolled through the open gate under the limes to the porch, and there on the green sward, in tree shadows pierced by sunlight, amid fluting of blackbirds and clear warbling of larks, appeared the whole family : the Squire and Mrs. Tyndall, Mab and Willoughby—Cecil was with his regiment, Jack in town, it was understood. There they were sitting with papers and needlework, companioned by the dogs stretched on the sunny turf, a picture of peaceful leisure, all rising and coming in a body to welcome her dusty self and disentangle her from her pile of wraps and hold-alls, bundles of golf clubs, racquets and bicycles, the endless *impedimenta* of the modern female on her travels. But when what Willoughby termed the hugging had been conscientiously accomplished, and the Squire and Mrs. Tyndall had each said for the tenth time, " Delighted to see you again, my dear," and Mab had sarcastically observed that she could scarcely have three

days' frocks in her baskets—according to Mab's modest reckoning of five a day—Marcia became acutely and unpleasantly conscious of another presence, the commanding one of Captain Borman, who now brought up the rear of the welcoming force, with his cold smile and self-contained air, and tranquilly helped Willoughby help the servants to unlade the carriage.

"Are you staying here?" Marcia bluntly asked him in the shock of her surprise at this unexpected vision, and was reminded that the army crammer with whom Willoughby was just now reading, and who lived on the other side of the village, was Borman's sister's husband and present host, for which last clause she silently thanked Heaven.

But the May skies had lost something of their lucid beauty, the light pouring through young linden foliage was less serenely radiant, and the soft blooming of everything, from the flower-beds to the yellow wall-flower aloft in the gable coping, where the stonework showed cracks and clefts, was less heartsome because of that unexpected guest. He, on his part, appeared to derive much tranquil

satisfaction from her presence, and was infinitely serviceable in handing her chairs, cups of tea, and plates of cake and fruit.

She liked the country in May? So did he. That morning he had helped take a swarm of bees. Great fun. Had she heard of the new golf links? He had observed her bundle of clubs; she would find it difficult to surpass Miss Tyndall, who was very bad to beat.

All rancour, all painful memories of geese, mud-ponds, and facers between the eyes had completely passed from the mind of this amiable warrior, to judge from the pensive sweetness of his manner. Marcia blushed to think that the very hand with which she helped herself to the bread and butter he so civilly handed her had so recently smitten that serene and martial visage and tumbled the commanding form, now serviceably bowed before her, head over heels into the goose-pond. Forgetfulness of past injuries is one of the most beautiful of Christian virtues.

Still, when she observed the golden hour upon the clock in the village steeple that rose in hoary dignity beneath the hill before them,

and reckoned up the distance to the brother-in-law's house, his early dinner hour and the time necessary to dress for it, she was glad, and pensively called attention to the time by some depreciating comparison between the unimpeachable rectitude of the church clock and the deplorable vagaries of the little enamelled dial she drew from a pocket and contemplated with interest.

"I only wonder that you could look the poor man in the face," Mab commented, when he was gone.

"I had much rather have looked any other man in the face," was the reply. "But it would have been rude to turn away from him ; his beauty seems unimpaired. How nice it is to be down here in the quiet ! London is so tiring. Who is coming for Whitsuntide ? Couldn't we manage our play ? Aren't you going to have a dance, Aunt Janet ? Give me country quiet. My tastes always were Arcadian."

"Yes, my dear. Country quiet, *with* balls and theatricals and plenty of people staying in the house," assented the Squire. "You could always stand that kind of Arcadia—for a couple of weeks."

“With a few dinners, and garden parties and picnics in summer, and hunting in winter,” Marcia pensively added. “Now, Aunt Janet, how have you provided for my Arcadian tastes?”

“Why, my dear, I have ordered rook-pies, salads, and early strawberries, and Mallick thinks he can send in new potatoes to-morrow and cut asparagus in a few days,” was the instant and unconsidered reply. “Mallick knows your tastes and always considers them.”

“Gross materialism. Did it never strike you that I might possess some faint substitute for a soul? Are there to be no more cakes and ale—I mean dances and plays? Whenever I’m wretched I think of that dear lattice window peeping out of the ivy up there, and the cosy sleeps I’ve slept in the room behind it. Don’t ever let anybody else have that room looking up the avenue. How are all the village folk, and the farm folk, and the parson folk? And above all, how is dear, dear Rob Roy?”

It was pleasant to walk round the place and talk to the people, and be made welcome and look at the bees and the poultry, and see

the promise of the kitchen garden, and hear the sea surging faintly on a reef in the distance, and ask innumerable questions without waiting for answers. The pleasantest thing of all was the distant figure of Rob Roy quietly cropping grass in the meadow and responding to her call with a whimper of pleasure, as he lifted his head from the pasture and came capering up to put his nose in her hand and be caressed and fed with sugar.

“He’s to be shod to-morrow and taken in and got into condition,” her uncle told her. “He’ll be quite fit for a short turn on the downs now when you are ready. I hope you will have a happy time here, Marcia. And I wish you would make it your real home, my dear, and only go away for visits—unless you have a home of your own soon, as I hope you will.”

“You are so kind,” she replied, with a quiver in her mouth, when she looked up into the florid, healthy English face, and met the kind gaze of the steady blue eyes; “but I can’t risk wearing my welcome out.”

“You would never do that,” he said, still

keeping his hands in his pockets and standing straight and stiff, while Marcia clasped her hands on his arm and pressed her face childishly against his shoulder. "But you are not the kind of woman to live single and without a home. You may get into mischief, you will certainly be unhappy, unless you settle down to wholesome family life. However, don't forget that wherever I am is always your home. I can't answer for when I'm gone. It would be a great comfort to see you married and settled first. Why, what's the matter?" he asked, feeling a sob upon his arm.

"Nothing, nothing," was the muffled response from an unseen face.

"My dear child, trust me; don't be afraid. You've neither father nor mother. And you are not happy," the good-hearted man said very gravely and kindly, keeping in the same stolid attitude. "Is it money, mischief—or men? Has some man played you false? If he has, he's a good riddance. You are not very young, and you have refused many good offers—or as good as refused. Sometimes a girl makes a mistake and takes a little admi-

ration or flirtation for something deeper, or sends away some good fellow before she finds out that she cares for him. Wise girls get over these things. There are plenty of fish left in the sea, and the man worth wasting a month's fretting over was never born. Come, lassie, tell the trouble." A strong brown hand was removed from a pocket to stroke the bronze-tinted hair that the evening sun lighted up and played in. "Don't be afraid," he added: "very likely you've been playing the fool; we all do, boys and girls, sometimes, don't you know."

But all his suppositions were groundless, he heard; then some sobs were conquered, a wet face was raised from his arm, dried and kissed, and they turned back to the house, whence the sound of a gong was audible. Then Marcia ran quickly up to the room she loved and had loved since she first went, a little child, to stay at Youngwoods. It was the same room with the same window-seat, and the same pleasant lookout to the sea and towards the avenue. Flower-scents and sea-breath stole in as usual with the singular freshness and purity of country air; on the

one side pleasant sunshine in excess had to be excluded ; the simple furniture was as fresh and clean-looking as ever, the well-known prints were on the walls, one window looked over the porch and down the avenue, its fresh green translucent now in steadily showering sunlight ; but there was something wrong, a bitter disappointment spoilt all.

She dressed quickly and simply, and sat in the window-seat looking down the avenue, while the sunbeams grew softer and more level, flower-scents sweeter, and the magic of the hour that vainly called County Guy drew on.

“Ah, County Guy, the hour is nigh,
The sun has left the lea,
The orange flower perfumes the bower,
The breeze is on the sea ;
The lark, his lay who trilled all day,
Sits hushed his partner nigh ;
Breeze, bird, and flower confess the hour,
But where is County Guy ?”

“Mine is a singular destiny,” she thought, as she ran down to dinner, still wondering at her disappointment ; “I must certainly have been born under a particularly spiteful star.”

Yet the dance was to take place, and the other festivities she had asked about, and Jack was coming down for Whitsuntide, and Cecil for the dance.

“Who cares for dances and dinners?” she reflected. “What is duller than dull gaiety?”

“Look here, I’ll take you round the links to-morrow afternoon,” Willoughby said generously. “I can’t before; I have to grind the whole blessed morning.”

“No, Willoughby, I take her round myself the first time,” the Squire corrected.

So the following day saw him start off with Marcia and Mabel, eager as a boy, towards the downs, where the sheep scuttered off in amazement at the strange new pranks played among them by their biped friends.

“I wonder if Beaumont remembers that he was to come in the summer,” the Squire suddenly said, when they were winding up a narrow lane under hedges laden with may. “When did you hear from him last, Mab?”

Marcia, who was in advance, bent to gather cowslips from a bank on which thyme was already budding, and heard Mab say carelessly :

"Oh! I think it must have been some weeks ago. Has he been asked for the dance? Best not, Pater; let us have only good dancing men—no sticks."

"Just as you like, my dear," was the easy reply. "What's the scent, Marcie? Beans?"

"No, uncle, white clover; how sweet!"

There had been rain in the night and the still afternoon was clouded but clearing. There seemed no end to the growth of things: the changing green tints increased almost visibly; the earth seemed to breathe in steamy fragrance of many mingled odours; the still air palpitated with life; a great chorus of song-birds made rich, fresh music everywhere; the caw-caw of rooks had a breezy vitality that tranquillised while it animated. The world seemed as young as if just fresh made.

"Die unbegreiflich hohen Werke
Sind herrlich wie am ersten Tag."

So Marcia thought, with quickened heart-throbs and a strangled longing to express her thought—to Jack, for instance; Jack recognised the inwardness of things. But Mab was lamenting the damp that uncurled her

fringe, and the Squire expressing regret at having had luncheon, a thing no man should do before climbing hills, he averred, especially when the sun is north of the equator. But nothing could spoil the delicate vernal scent of cowslips or the feeling of young vitality that cloudy May day breathed, not even the voice singing,

" He turned his charger as he spake
Upon the river shore;
He gave his bridle-reins a shake,
Said ' Adieu for evermore, my love,
And adieu for evermore.' "

The song passed into a lusty whistle, as the Tyndalls went through a gate upon the summit of the open down, and the Squire directed the girls' attention to the broad plain of sea spreading away to the sky-line in many interchanging hues of blue and green, dashed by deep indigo and dark grey, that he might pass his handkerchief unobserved over his broad forehead and recover his breath unseen.

" How the gulls follow that dark patch ! " he said, pointing to what looked like foam-flakes that hovered above the waves and then

poised all together upon it, when they looked like a miniature fleet under sail.

The whistling had stopped ; the whistler, the inevitable Borman, as Mabel called him, now had more serious work on hand : he was about to strike a ball.

The human body is a beautiful and exquisitely imagined instrument, always most beautiful when adapting its fine-wrought powers to some end ; of all the graceful postures of which it is capable, perhaps that of the poise before the golf-club descends upon the ball is the most beautiful, calling as it does so many muscles and members into play. The raised head, slightly thrown back with eager forward glance, the expanded chest, the flowing body and hip lines, in harmony with the sweeping curves of the uplifted arms grasping the club, the firm planting of the feet, followed by the grand backward and forward swoop of the whole body to bring the accumulated impetus of all the muscles into the stroke, unite to form a splendid plastic pose that few can see without admiration.

Nor was the tall and well-knit figure of

Norris Borman, set off by Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, spare of flesh and clean of limb, one to disgrace a fine pose, or come short of any bodily art. Yet the sight of him inspired Marcia with displeasure mingled with fear.

“Bravo!” cried the Squire, as the club came crack upon the centre of the ball, and sent it straight and clear to its destination. The player’s tense muscles relaxed, a faint gleam of pleasure lit his eyes as they followed the ball, and he turned, raised his cap, and came towards the new arrivals, who were soon engaged in making plastic poses of their own, the ladies partly disqualified by their skirts and the gentleman by the stiffer muscles and sturdier build of his more advanced age.

Two hours later, Mabel and Marcia, Willoughby, his father, and Borman were grouped on the summit of the down round a may-laden thorn, eagerly discussing matters in which such mystic terms as “bunker,” “niblick,” “brassey,” “putting,” and “teeing” occurred, Mabel oblivious even of her ruined curls, and Marcia of everything but the point

at issue, when Borman, who was seldom oblivious of anything that concerned her, observed a quick flash succeeded by a deadly pallor on her vivid face. Following the direction of her dilating eyes, he perceived the figure of a man issuing from the park-like groves of Nutcombe Place and coming towards them. The words she was speaking died upon Marcia's lips, the delicate green of the beeches became a mist mingling with a pearly sky dashed with blue ; she turned her crimsoning face towards a prospect of fields and hills : the village spire swam before her, the broad sea, with its long dark promontories and shining sails and sea-gulls, went round and round with the hills above the village, then everything turned dark, and the sound of her pulses was so loud in her ears that she thought others must have heard it.

"You are unwell, Miss Ludlow," said a low and solicitous voice at her ear, as Borman stepped quickly towards her with outstretched hands, his voice and the repulsion inspired by his rearer presence rousing her to collect herself with a strong effort and recede from him with a steady gaze that cleared her vision.

"Quite well," she replied in a faint, unsteady voice. "White, was I? It was only a twinge of neuralgia."

By this time the man Borman had seen had come up with the group and drawn off the attention concentrated upon the apparent indisposition of Marcia to himself.

"Why, it's Beaumont, of all people in the world!" said the Squire, a hearty ring of welcome in his voice.

CHAPTER IV

MUSIC AND MOONLIGHT

“There are flashes struck from midnights, there are fire-flames noondays kindle,
Whereby piled-up honours perish, whereby swollen ambitions dwindle,
While just this and that poor impulse, that for once had play unstifled,
Seems the sole work of a lifetime that away the rest have trifled.”

A CURIOUS little smile played upon Norris Borman's keen face, and a watchful glitter lit his eyes, which absorbed every detail of this unexpected meeting with an old acquaintance. It suddenly occurred to him that Beaumont was a good-looking man, of fine presence and winning address. The latter, like himself, was becomingly arrayed in knickerbockers, spats, and Norfolk jacket and cap; his eyes were dark and full of feeling, his smile very sweet, especially when shaking hands with *Belle Dame sans Merci*. There

are many more ways of raising a cap than is commonly supposed; Beaumont's way was one of perfection.

His manner to Miss Ludlow, Borman observed, was quite that of an ordinary acquaintance: he took her hand with a slight and momentary touch, as if it were in sober sooth a lady's hand, and neither a sacred relic to be held in breathless awe, nor some rich and delicate casket containing the quintessence of the world's treasure, nor something that had dealt him grievous hurt, nor something that, having once been over-precious, had become worthless, even repulsive. But then Borman had seen him reconnoitre the group under the may-tree through glasses; he had had ample time to control any agitation he might have felt. Apparently it was Marcia who had cause to be surprised and agitated. Why else should an unusual fainting-fit and an equally unusual indisposition, hastily labelled neuralgia, coincide with this young woman's two unexpected meetings with a man who had evidently some secret understanding with her?

She was still very pale when she gave her hand to Beaumont ; her tremulous lips murmured some inaudible response to his cordial but conventional " How are you ? " — her face upturned to his glance had a certain glow through its pallor ; her deep eyes were liquid with light. Borman had always admired her ; now he thought her really beautiful. A sheaf of sunrays shot through edges of rolling cloud ; the sudden sunburst spread like a smile of young happiness over field and hill and sea, calling an infinite variety of vivid greens and golds and browns from grass and foliage, making the sea change and shine like a dove's neck, the dark hills gleam with purple and amethyst, orchards and blossomed fields and trees grow rich with soft colouring. It brought out bronzy gleams in Marcia's prettily roughened hair, lighted her bunch of cowslips, and glowed in the crimson silk disclosed where the coat opened from throat to waist ; it caressed the hand laid a moment in Beaumont's and enfolded them both in its glory. A lark shot up from the turf in a spiral of joyous melody and was lost to the last flutter of its wings ; the gurgle of a

hidden nightingale came from warm coppice in a hollow far below.

Beaumont had not forgotten his invitation to Youngwoods, he said in answer to the Squire's reproach, but hoped to accept it later on. He was just now alone in the country, his absent cousin having lent him Nutcombe for a week, grinding at some work that required close attention. He had arrived only the day before, had been working all day, and had only just heard of the links, not having thought of bringing clubs to these remote parts. Very public-spirited of the Squire; he understood it was his land, just on the boundary of Sharland's.

This information interested Borman immensely, though he did not appear concerned in it, being occupied in bending down a long branch of may, all set with pearly bloom and thorns, which he broke off for the *Belle Dame*, and, having deprived of its sharp spikes, gallantly presented to her. The date of Beaumont's arrival in the country appeared to him especially suggestive. But he could not quite grasp the motive that converted

Beaumont for the rest of the round into the *Belle Dame's* caddie, those serviceable adjuncts to the game being scarce in these regions, and was a little surprised to find him, later on, reclining on a cowslip and violet bank at the feet of that lady, sheltered from observation by a wind-writhen thorn, white with scented bloom.

The picture was Arcadian, yet neither the damsel nor her swain looked as happy as old poets represent people to be under such circumstances. It is true that neither had a pipe or tabor, while the nearest approach to garlands was a cowslip in the Major's coat and a bit of may in that of *Sans Merci*. Captain Borman had himself presented the may; he was not sure how long the cowslip had been gathered, but remembered that Marcia was wearing cowslips earlier in the afternoon.

The Arcadian pair rose from the flowery bank at his approach and joined the rest of the party, sauntering slowly along the down ridge till they came to a small wooded glen folded in the hill flank, at the top of which was a seaward-looking summer-house. Here

Tyndall land ended and Nutcombe property began.

“Your cousin sometimes gives us tea there,” Mabel observed to her cavalier, who promptly suggested following his cousin’s example, and sent a messenger with necessary orders to the house, the gables of which were visible among the tree-tops lower down. The evening had brightened more and more, the slanting sunrays pouring through pale-green boughs and mossy trunks in golden glory, so that it became increasingly pleasant to sit in the dappled shadows among manifold wood-scents, and chat in the easy intimacy created by handing teacups and bread and butter, and manipulating kettles and spirit-lamps in open air.

The *Belle Dame*, aware that repose is more becoming to female beauty than activity, sat very still and gave mankind present the pleasure of supplying her needs. Marcia held that every teapot needed a feminine ministrant, a doctrine which, acted upon, gave satisfaction to all present. Beaumont, as host, felt it especially incumbent upon him to hand the tea she poured

out; and, when these duties had been properly fulfilled, took the empty place beside her on the rustic bench and talked to her upon subjects that Borman, from his position at the foot of a mossy beech trunk near the *Belle Dame*, inferred to be of singular interest to both. From such words as "*Götterdämmerung*," "*Tristan*," "*Isolde*," "*Bayreuth*," "*Valkyrie*," that reached him from time to time, he further concluded that a taste for modern music or German myth was common to these two. He also noted, after a benevolent observation from Miss Ludlow that cigar smoke in open air gave positive pleasure to herself and cousin had been cheerfully acted upon, that Beaumont's cigar, except for a few first enjoyable whiffs, remained unsmoked and cold between his fingers, so deep was his evident interest in the conversation of his neighbour, whose eyes glowed deeply, and whose slender form and well-featured face appeared to be animated by some vital spirit of joy and sweetness.

Beaumont himself happened to wonder, at the same instant with Borman, whether this could be the girl who had smacked that

distinguished soldier off his feet into the goose-pond a few months ago. That bitter memory turned Borman green for a moment : the more charming the author of that misdeed looked the greener the victim of it grew, and the more fiercely he smoked the honest briarwood between his lips and the greener he grew the more fascinating did the flowing lines of the lady's half-reclining figure, one arm laid on the bench-back as she faced Beaumont, who was in a similar position, appear, and the more lovely did her sparkling face and shining eyes seem to him.

The sunbeams were almost level when the *Belle Dame* made her third and final attempt to get her party away from that seductive spot ; a nightingale had burst into full song, swallows were wheeling in their evening mazes, the scent of clover brought all the glamour of returning summer to mind.

“Come, girls, we must race for it,” cried the Squire, hearing the hour from the steeple clock below and putting his words into literal effect, to the great discomfort of the *Belle Dame*, who held that time and tide, and dinners should always wait for woman.

But Marcia kept easily level with her uncle's giant strides, unconscious of effort or fatigue, feeling as if floating on sunbeams in clover and may-scent. She said nothing, as she seemed to sink like a sunset cloud from the hill ridge towards the sea, but her heart was full of joy and alive with hope, or that form of it termed anticipation. She spoke little at table, but her eyes were like stars ; after dinner she sat long at the piano, playing scraps of melody and musical phrase from "*Tristan und Isolde*," and "*Tannhäuser*," and the "*Ring der Nibelungen*."

"I cannot understand that girl," her uncle commented later on. "Last night she was so down, I never saw Marcia so down before. And look at her to-night. Tired with the journey, was she ? No, my dear, she was not tired, the journey was nothing. But I must say that her future is a source of much disquiet to me."

"She will marry and settle down, my dear," was the wife's complacent rejoinder. "Girls are often flighty and unsettled at her age. She feels that her youth is going ; she is tired of an aimless life. She is not quite penniless and very attractive."

"She has very little, Janet, and is not easily pleased. She will never marry. Too much fire and flame. She's made of gunpowder and quicksilver, and if she hasn't made a mess of her life somehow, my name's not Harry Tyndall. I suspect Jack knows all about it. They are like twins; both of them clever and queer. I shouldn't wonder if she liked Borman after all in some perverse way. Girls often spite the man they like best, and then fret themselves to fiddle-strings because he won't be whistled back in a minute. I wonder if Mab means to have Hugh Beaumont? No such luck, I'm afraid. And Beaumont is a first-rate fellow. These women! These women!"

Similar speculations occupied the mind of Norris Borman, whose continued and studious observation of every word and look of Marcia and Beaumont never relaxed, and who still cherished some intention of taming the wild heart of that disdainful lady to his hand. He was not easily baffled and quite unaccustomed to renounce a purpose once formed. Nor did he leave any stone unturned in his efforts discover the nature of

the secret relations that must have existed between Marcia and Beaumont before their meeting at Youngwoods in the winter. It was not difficult to draw from casual talk with Beaumont that he had been in India at the time when Marcia was with her brother in the same country. That both had been at Simla in the same year was a discovery rewarding many days' patient search through a maze of tortuous allusion and disjointed chat, generally with some third person, concerning that pleasant resort.

But neither Beaumont nor Marcia could be brought to admit having met at Simla ; each seemed to speak very guardedly on the subject of their Indian life. Of the climate they spoke, and the travelling accommodation. It was "Yes ; I remember Mrs. So-and-So, her husband was Commissioner for such a place," or "That was no doubt the Robinson you mean, he was in the Artillery." "Yes ; Colonel Such a one was a very hot-tempered man, his wife the reverse ; they were known as Brimstone and Treacle. He was in command of such a regiment." "No, I never met So-and-So."

Beaumont's delight in Wagner held him riveted all one wet afternoon to a piano at which Marcia sat playing, first of her own accord and then at his request, reminiscence after reminiscence of opera. Sometimes her memory failed, she felt for the air on the keys, but always missed the essential linking, when Beaumont whistled it straight ; or he would whistle an incomplete phrase with similar failure, and she would supply the full strain from the piano, with a smile of soft triumph. Discussions, accentuated and illustrated by similar snatches, followed ; then Marcia would begin to play again, her face rapt and ecstatic, and Beaumont to listen and supply links, with a face only less dreamily happy than hers. People came and went, conversation rose from a buzz to a chorus of laughter, or louder-voiced eagerness ; but those two at the piano in the inner drawing-room took no heed ; they appeared to have neither ears, eyes, nor thoughts for the surrounding world, dwelling happily apart in one of their own.

The clouds broke away, the day cleared, a relenting sun shot a dazzling radiance over

the green wet world : those driven indoors by stress of weather fared forth again, but the curious Wagner duet continued. Jack, who was down for a Whitsuntide, sent a wistful little smile towards the musicians ; Cecil, who had originated the Wagner topic, looked thoughtfully in that direction as he left the outer drawing-room ; the Squire supposed it was no use to propose billiards to either of the Wagnerians. Borman averred that it were sin to miss the music for the click of billiard balls, and gave himself a reason for remaining within eyeshot of the instrument, by holding skeins for Mrs. Tyndall to wind and appearing to hear all she had to say very fluently upon a great variety of subjects, responding with a judicious "yes," with or without the note of interrogation, and a well-timed smile of assent or sympathy.

He silently noted the singular new development of beauty in his fair enemy at the piano, wondered at new tones in her voice and fresh sparkle in her looks. Every moment she became more worthy and more difficult of subjugation ; he would have given

years of his life to call that soft, vital lustre to her eyes, and those tones to her voice, though at this distance they were but a faint murmur responded to by other faint murmurs in Beaumont's deeper tones. In these days he had been careful, in his unobtrusive way, to cultivate Beaumont's acquaintance ; the two had discussed many impersonal themes, especially what they termed shop. On that very day he had adroitly given a personal turn to the talk, quickly parried by Beaumont, and after a little circumlocution reintroduced by Borman. Did Beaumont think the rumour of Miss Ludlow's engagement to Jack Tyndall true ? Beaumont was unaware of any such rumour.

"It is rather an old story," Borman continued, "but I never heard any sufficient refutation of it."

"No?"

"It may have been before you made Miss Ludlow's acquaintance," Borman urged, and Beaumont replied with a "By the way, what did you think?" of some quite irrelevant matter ; whereupon Borman returned to the charge with the direct thrust of

“When did you first make Miss Ludlow’s acquaintance?”

“Surely,” Beaumont answered with some deliberation, “precise dates are unimportant.”

“Though events be vitally so?” pursued Borman. “Surely the importance of an event is determined by the date of its occurrence?”

“No doubt the death of a rich relation is more important when one happens to be hard up than at other times.”

“And the fact of being at some dreary Indian station enhances the charm of meeting a fresh English girl?”

“But were you ever in India?” returned Beaumont; and Borman, meeting the keen glance directed upon him, withdrew his forces in good order and ruminated upon his repulse at leisure.

On the night following this afternoon the long-meditated dance took place. Borman, who danced remarkably well, took an early opportunity to ask Marcia for a place on her programme, which, he was informed, was regrettably quite filled up.

“Then some one must be expelled,” he

said gaily. "I mean to have one dance, Miss Ludlow ; you can't decently refuse me one in your uncle's own house, don't you know."

"My card is full, Captain Borman," she returned coldly ; but he knew it was not true, and almost immediately afterwards saw her resign her programme to Beaumont, who made some hieroglyphics upon it, and after that to Jack Tyndall, who did the same.

Beaumont danced little, and, to Borman's surprise, only once with Mabel, who had taken care to provide the surplus of men necessary to a thoroughly enjoyable dance. Marcia danced much and extremely well, but she sat out a whole dance with Beaumont.

Towards morning Borman discovered those two people slowly patrolling the avenue together. The two figures, one black, the other white, looked dreamily unreal in the magic play of moonbeams and leaf-shadows, with silver lights sliding and glancing over them as they moved. Flower-scents were pungent out there in the cool night ; dance-music came softened by distance ; a nightingale was in full song hard by ; in its pauses, the boom of surf on a distant reef

was just audible. Above the silvered arches of the lindens, the Great Bear, faint but clear, was keeping his eternal faith with the Pole in his silent revolution. Borman's hands clenched at the sight of the man and woman in the avenue, a great pain stabbed him, his bold heart quailed.

Then Marcia's face, suddenly raised in the magic light and turned smiling to Beaumont, made one thing clear beyond all doubt to the jealous onlooker. Whatever their relations might have been in the past, whatever they might be in the future, he was absolutely convinced that, in this present moonlit moment of May, Marcia loved the man who walked at her side in the shadows. Her love made her face very lovely ; it imparted a fresh grace to her movements, it lived in every line of her supple, well-carried figure, and sang in every low tone of the voice that daily touched him more and more deeply.

He glided back into blacker shadow as the pair approached him, clenching his hands and his teeth, and gazing intently, with dilating eyes and quivering nostrils, in a fierce, confused passion of love and hate and fear, upon

the moonlit figures, noting the fine presence and knightly air of the tall, soldierly man, whose head was bent courteously, if not tenderly, to the lovely lady at his side, to whom he was speaking in low and earnest tones; he gazed until the throbbing of his strong wild heart half stifled him.

“Does he care for her? Does he?” he asked himself. “And was Mab Tyndall only a blind after all?”

CHAPTER V

TWO LETTERS

“The year’s at the spring,
And day’s at the morn ;
Morning’s at seven ;
The hillside’s dew-pearled ;
The lark’s on the wing ;
The snail’s on the thorn ;
God’s in His heaven—
All’s right with the world.”

THE secret and important work, which was understood to have some connection with the Staff appointment Hugh Beaumont filled, required a second week’s sojourn in rural quiet ; or it might have been that his brief visit to headquarters had resulted in further tasks. In any case he was still at Nutcombe at the end of a fortnight, which to at least one person in these regions had seemed a very long and eventful and pleasant sequence of days and nights, redolent of may-bloom, May music, and May beauty.

Many games of golf had been played on the new links, and of tennis and billiards not a few at Youngwoods, where the piano had more than once illustrated the beauties of Wagner's music and the theories thence deduced by Beaumont and Marcia ; a few picnics had been made along the coast.

It was at one of these functions that Beaumont made an impression by his spirited singing of " Shall I, wasting in Despair," to a fine, manly setting for a baritone of that famous song. Mab was so obliging as to accompany him on her banjo, after he had whistled the air for her. She did it well ; but Jack, who was still playing holiday on that occasion, thought that her smile was a trifle forced and her expression grave, during the whole-hearted, cheery refrain sung with such hearty enjoyment—

" If she think not well of me
What care I how fair she be ? "

He almost fancied his sister sighed when the mellow voice softened, grew richer, and sang :

" If she love mee (this beleeve)
I will Die ere she shall grieve."

This singing and picnicking occurred on the day before the neighbourhood was startled by the announcement of Mab Tyndall's engagement to Griffith Seaton, D.C.L., F.R.S., Ph.D., F.R.G.S., to designate a small portion of the alphabet sequent upon his well-known name, of which he was entirely worthy.

Dr. Seaton, like most great men, was small ; he was also thin and absent-minded ; he had never been supposed to be cognisant of the *Belle Dame's* existence, much less of her charms, before the announcement of the engagement ; though she had been known to rescue him more than once from embarrassing situations consequent upon the dreamy abstraction habitual to scholars.

Beaumont's singing of

“ If she slight me when I wo,
I can scorne and let her go ;
For if she be not for mee.
What care I for whom she bee ? ”

was one of the few things that roused Dr. Seaton's interest in surrounding things. He looked thoughtfully at the singer through his spectacles for some seconds and then said slowly :

"Do you know, Colonel Belmont, that sentiment strikes me as being remarkably fine? It embodies a philosophy of the relations between the sexes that appears to me to be an eminently sound one."

Later in the day, he again roused himself from profound thought to say, *à propos* of nothing whatever, "Do you know, Captain Beaufort, that song of yours was a very fine song, an eminently fine song?"

"Oh!" cried the *Belle Dame* pettishly, as the speaker emphasised his eulogy by taking and drinking a glass of claret-cup the astonished Beaumont was bringing to her, "pray don't admire his song any more. He doesn't want to be reduced to the ranks," an observation that summoned a gentle smile to Beaumont's face.

The May days, now verging on June, were very bright and summerlike. Marcia, dancing downstairs to breakfast on one of these mornings, glanced at a table in the hall upon which letters lay piled before being sorted and brought in, and instantly decided to reward her virtuous early rising by taking possession of her own, singing for pure joy

of heart, as she picked out her share and went into the breakfast-room, where she sank into a low chair to read them.

“Ah!” said Willoughby, the only other person yet present, “it’s the early bird that gets the worm, my dear child.”

“And what is your worm, little Billee?” was the cheerful rejoinder. “My dear boy, I hope this unexampled event may not portend your approaching demise?”

“Not mine. I’m the worm for the bird to have,” he returned, with an expression of feature that surprised his cousin.

“You are not so easily had, my Willie,” —she stopped, remembering that she had not spoken alone with the boy since their quarrel, or rather Willoughby’s anger at what he, no doubt justly, termed her interfering ways. “I hope you have forgiven me, Willie,” she added gently and gravely. “You know that I meant well, and I am, after all, as an elder sister to you. Please kiss me and make friends.”

“Oh rather! and be a good little boy and say my catechism. No, Marcia, I’ll be hanged if I’ll kiss you. Women should

know better than to interfere in men's—pleasures—or, vices—if you must have it. It's most unbecoming. You forget that I'm not a kid, nor even a schoolboy, any longer."

He had turned roughly away, wriggling from under the hand laid on his shoulder; yet she never ceased to feel his eyes upon her, while, in the course of breakfasting, she opened and read letter after letter, starting with an exclamation and a vivid blush when she found at the bottom of her pile an unstamped envelope on Nutcombe Place stationery, which she instantly slipped into her pocket unopened, but not unobserved. Looking quickly up, she met the eyes of Willoughby, who sat immediately opposite her, with a malicious grin on his face, and who, on meeting her quick glance, effaced himself behind his coffee-cup with a faint splutter.

"Rude boy," she thought, mentally assenting to Mab's often-expressed proposition that all male persons between the ages of twelve and twenty-three should be kept in cages and only taken out occasionally to exercise in leashes.

"I agree with Mab myself, I think sometimes they would be better in cages," her uncle said to her a few minutes later, when, on flitting out towards a retired nook in the grounds, she found him disconsolately pacing a yew-shaded walk with an unlighted pipe in his mouth. "I'm not sure that the Army is quite the profession for Willoughby; he's too old for the Navy, else the discipline of a man-of-war might have knocked some of the nonsense out of him. That boy, Marcia, has given more trouble than all the rest put together. And—I'm about sick of it."

"Dear Uncle Harry, don't you think you have forgotten what the others were at seventeen? Present evils always seem greater than past ones."

"No, my dear," he replied sadly, "I have forgotten nothing. I hope I'm not hard on the boy. His mother spoilt him from his cradle, as perhaps I did myself. It's the fate of the youngest. But——"

"Nothing new, I hope? Come, let me light this pipe for you. There. Bad boys often turn out the best men. Don't look like

that, Uncle Harry," she added, pulling his face down to kiss.

"He'll never be a good man," cried his father savagely; "he isn't *straight*. He doesn't know what *honour* means," he added, his lip quivering, and great tears in his eyes. "My son is not a gentleman, Marcia, and never can be. There, forget it, forget it. But it's—it's an awful pain, this. His mother doesn't know—and—it's a relief to speak it out, Marcie; and you always were an understanding little minx."

"Dear Uncle Harry, it is only a phase. There has been evil influence. A boy of seventeen is wax to his companions."

"Ay! there's the rub; wax he is. Oh, yes, I'll trust him, my dear. I'll appeal to his honour, and I'll hope and hope. I was fond of the boy, too fond, and I suppose I'm being punished for it."

It took some time and the smoking of a whole pipe to soothe the Squire and start him off upon pleasanter topics; but at last he went away comforted to his morning's occupation, and Marcia, wondering over this great daily tragedy of disappointed fathers, and

very pitiful of the wounded heart disclosed to her tender touch, went sighingly to her chosen covert, where a beech spread long and thick branches almost to the mossy earth beneath, and where she sat on one long bough, her feet on another, her head against another, amid layers of young tender green ; and, softly swaying, swathed in fresh foliage, Oread-like, drew forth the unstamped letter with such a throb of happy anticipation as made her a little ashamed. It seemed selfish to rejoice so greatly when others were so sad. After all, was there such great matter for rejoicing ? She did not so much as know for certain who had written that letter ; she only divined it in the depths of her happy heart, divining also, to some extent, the contents of the yet virgin cover inscribed with her name in a neat and delicate hand.

Slowly, and with tremulous fingers, she broke the cover and drew out the paper, closely written and signed, as her heart had so truly foreboded, "*Hugh Beaumont.*" He had never before written to her, and now apologised for writing what he could not gather sufficient courage to say. She seemed

to know the handwriting so well ; handwriting is so expressive of character. She did not so much read the letter as grasp its tenour, while the paper, on which delicate green shadows quivered, swam mistily before her eyes, her cheek whitened and her heart throbbed.

She sat there in the cool green lights long and so still, after the first swaying of the boughs under her weight, that a robin perched upon her shoulder, a thrush warbled within touch, lights and shadows changed and slid over her face and her pale grey skirt and blue blouse. Then, at last, she slipped from her Oread sheathing, and flitted lightly and quickly by the shortest way back to the house and up to the seclusion of the room she loved, there to ponder the contents of that startling communication and frame a suitable reply to it. This, when finished, was despatched by special messenger to Nutcombe Place, where Beaumont, on returning from the Rectory after dining there, found and read it with an emotion difficult to imagine.

Nightingales sang all through that soft

May night by the open windows of Nutcombe Place and amid the bushes of Youngwoods ; but something more potent than that moon-music kept one person awake and listening in each house ; and in each house one person was glad when scarlet shafts of sunrise pierced the pale dawn and larks shot up from the dews and sang themselves mute ; yet each was less glad as the sun mounted in the clear blue, and all the fresh young beauty of the world was spread out in full splendour of sunshine.

Later still, when each of the two rose in the silence of a sleeping house, and went out in the freshness to the appointed spot at the head of the wooded glen where Youngwoods and Nutcombe lands divided as they met, both were inclined to do anything rather than what they rose on purpose to do.

“ The year’s at the spring,
And day’s at the morn ;
Morning’s at seven,”

might have been written of that fair morning.

“ God’s in His heaven—
All’s right with the world,”

one of them thought.

Beaumont was well before the appointed hour, as became a gallant soldier and loyal knight ; but he lingered in the shadow out of sight, to catch a glimpse of the lady on the down ridge before going to the broad-armed chestnut, reading while he lingered, neither for the first nor the second time, the letter which had been written and received with such strong emotion.

“ DEAR MAJOR BEAUMONT,—I need hardly tell you that your letter was a very great surprise to me. Indeed, I cannot realise it yet at all. That *you* should think *so* of *me* will be an astonishment all my life. But can you have thought of all my drawbacks and deficiencies? Or do you even know half of them? And will you not change your thoughts of me when you do know? Or have you not mistaken your feelings and acted too quickly upon a fleeting impulse? Indeed, I fear [scratched out and ‘think’ substituted] it must be so, in spite of your assertion that the feeling in some form was always in your heart and has grown very rapidly with every meeting, especially in the

last few days. Indeed I am greatly, greatly honoured, so much honoured that I am humbled to the dust at the thought of my great unworthiness, and wonder if I ought to be entrusted with your happiness. It seems wise to meet, as you propose, before taking any step so decisive as that of speaking to my uncle. I will be at the bench under the chestnut-tree at seven—I quite understand where it is—at the top of the glen near the summer-house, where you gave us tea that afternoon. As you say, to-morrow morning is quite sure to be fine. In the meantime pray think it over, and consider if you really and permanently feel what you say. I am all faults and weaknesses, I am very hasty in temper, and often do foolish things that I regret, and that annoy my friends. The greatest misery I can think of would be to disappoint you and not succeed in making you happy. No, I cannot say 'Hugh,'—yet, at all events; but I may in perfect truth and pride and thankfulness say, 'my dear, dear friend,' as I think and hope you will always be, whatever calmer and more considered views you may on reflection take

of your future revelations with your sincere friend,

“ MARCIA LUDLOW.

“ YOUNGWOODS.

“ P.S.—You have made me so happy. It is like some exquisite dream or fairy poem. And the four-leaved clover has come true, at last, at last. My dear friend.”

The postscript evoked a smile. It was so like a woman to concentrate the pith of the whole in it, so pleasingly unmasculine also was its self-revelation and whole-hearted destruction of previous arguments at a stroke. The last reading of this agitating letter mixed up the sunny slope of down, the sparkling sea with its shadowy headlands, the village and hills and blue bloom of distance, and made them dim and blurred. When they grew clear again, a long shadow fell upon the turf, and the outline of the slender figure for which he was looking was seen moving towards the trees.

Marcia was scarcely aware of the ideal beauty of that fresh morning, empty of humanity, except for a few scattered labourers afield; empty of humanity, yet throbbing with

expectation of the one human being who is the epitome and sum of all ; she was drawing near, in the movement of stars and suns and the time they mark, to the goal of all her youth and hope ; she was one with the beauty and vitality of the springtime, enfolded and absorbed by the consciousness of loving and being loved. Birds sang it, the bloom and greenery breathed it, light airs whispered it, and it glowed through the vivid glory of sunshine flooding the earth.

But when she came to the verdurous gloom of the dell, she touched earth again, and all kinds of trepidations and fears shook her. Perhaps it would have been better not to come ; she had too readily assented—

“ It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden,
Too like the lightning that doth cease to be
Ere one can say ‘ It lightens.’ ”

She would turn back.

No, that would be unworthy, small, selfish. Besides, it was too late. She paused at the gate, gathered courage, opened it and passed over the mossed path with a firm step and head held proudly. The gate fell to with a clang — did he hear it, like the lover in

Schiller's poem? Her heart gave a throb, her breath caught as her dewy glance perceived a tall form moving towards her from under the chestnut's spreading boughs. It was actually he ; she knew it by the glamour that came before the clean-cut features or the magic of the dark and penetrating glance could be distinguished. Her eyes fell ; before she raised them again, they were face to face. Full sunlight caught her sideways, firing golden gleams in her hair, showing the grace of her figure in its neat and plain costume, striking full on her glowing face, lighting the wild flowers in her coat, and making the pink tie and hat-ribbon burn.

The place of meeting was on mossy ground, starred with wild flowers and dropped chestnut-bloom, with trees in full leaf all round, and masses of green set with fairy pyramids of bloom overhead ; surely a fit trysting-place for two people in the summer of their years. But why this curious pause as of swooning pulses? She saw the hyacinths swaying in the grass, and rabbits frisking outside the wood on the grey turf, and heard the cuckoo's mock-

ing cry before she looked up, as women look with such feelings as hers in their hearts, and perceived that his face was pale, his eyes grave, his mouth a little stern.

“How can I thank you,” he began, “how thank you enough for your kindness in coming this morning, for the great honour and pleasure you are doing me?”

“Kindness? Thanks? Oh! But the morning is lovely, it would be a sin to stay indoors. Why should people waste the pleasantest time?” she returned lightly, going towards the tree, which was furrowed by its branching upward growth, and held a rough bench in one of its furrows.

What deadly fear was this that crept into her heart and turned it sick? She sank upon the bench; he took a seat on a broad spur of the trunk a little beneath and facing her.

“I received your letter late last night,” he said very gravely. “I could not answer it except by coming, without rousing two households——”

“Ah!” she returned quickly with a catch in her voice, “you *were* precipitate. You *had* mistaken the nature of your feelings?”

"Scarcely that," he objected with a gentle courtesy that touched her. "Miss Ludlow, I thank you from my heart for that letter and for the very great honour you have done me. But—it—it appears to be an answer to *another* letter."

"Appears to be?" It was Marcia's turn to go white now. "What can you mean? How could my letter be anything but a reply to yours?"

"Before Heaven," he cried, with sudden emotion, "I cannot insult you by any lie; I will not tamper with feelings I am unworthy to—I would die rather than hurt you. But—forgive me if I ask—when and where did you receive that letter?"

It seemed as if she had known it all before in the sickening certainty that crushed her; her head drooped and fell against the outstanding rib of the chestnut trunk; her eyes darkened and closed; her breath came short and sibilant; then she pulled herself together with an effort, raised her head and looked steadily, even proudly, in his face.

"I see it all," she said. "It was a mistake. It is a dream. Surely I cannot be

mad. But I did truly believe that I received a letter yesterday, signed Hugh Beaumont and dated Nutcombe Place. Is not your name Hugh? Or is there another Hugh Beaumont just now at Nutcombe?"

"As I live, I have written you no letter, dear lady. I cannot deceive you," he protested. "Do you even know my handwriting? Here is some," taking a notebook from his pocket and opening it haphazard for her to see.

"The letter was in that handwriting—as it seemed," she replied, passing her hand across her eyes. "Yet I was awake and quite sane—so I thought; in the morning too. I found it on the hall table before breakfast and took it into the garden to read."

"Dear Miss Ludlow," he began in a voice full of feeling, "my first impulse on receiving that letter was to—to accept the situation and take this great and unexpected good fortune. For my own sake I should never have regretted it—though marriage has long been far from my thoughts—and is at present not possible. But I don't like lies. And

your letter showed you to be above—no, I cannot insult such a woman by anything short of absolute truth."

"Thank God you did not," she rejoined quickly.

"It would be unfair to take so much and give nothing—nothing but honour and gratitude and regard in return. For, indeed, that letter—is very noble—and sweet. I have been thinking it over all night long, sometimes wanting to seize the good fortune I have no right to take, and sometimes feeling that I owed you the whole truth and that a lie can bring no good—always afraid to harm you."

"And you have chosen the right alternative, and I thank you," she replied in a voice so even and calm and with a gaze so tranquil that he wondered at her spirit.

"You are not like other women," he said; and she smiled faintly, wondering that men think that a compliment to the individual which insults the sex. "You can bear truth; you are worthy of it. When first I knew you I did you injustice. I was prejudiced because you hunted till you fainted,

and because you knocked that brute, Borman, into the mud. I was a fool. I know you better now. I knew you better before —before your letter came. Ah! don't cry, don't. You'll soon forget it all. What idiotic fooling of mine may have caused this wretched misunderstanding?"

"None, none; it was all my own fault, my own credulity," she said with a stifled sob. "I ought to have seen that it was too sudden and improbable. Indeed," she added, regaining her tranquillity, "nothing you ever said, or did, or even looked, ever led me for a moment to suppose that you—cared for me in that way, nothing. I was glad that you liked to talk about things we both liked, and that you asked me to dance, and—such things; but I never for one moment thought of anything more. Your letter—I mean that letter—astonished me beyond words. Yet some one must have written it."

"It was a diabolical thing to do, beyond the very worst of worst possible jokes. And from what motive?" he asked. "Oh! it was vile. To break into the sanctuary of a

woman's heart, to kindle and disappoint, and then lay bare, feelings——”

“ Not to lay them bare,” she replied with sudden passion, “ not to the world. Only to one—to one who will respect them and keep the secret inviolate, to one who is in every way worthy, to one who may one day, in sorrow or sickness, in loneliness or temptation, be soothed or sustained by knowing that there is one heart beating beneath the sun on which he can wholly rely, one soul daily imploring alms of Heaven for him, daily thinking and hoping for his well-being. Oh! do you think I grudge this thing that has been accidentally shown to you—though you do not want it—this one thing that I have to give? Love has no stint, it grows by giving, it forgets self. I do not regret what I have given. I am glad and proud to have given it where I have, glad and proud. Why be ashamed of the highest and deepest feeling a woman can have? I can trust it in your hand, to your chivalry. You will not despise it, nor will you think scorn of me for what I could not have helped if I would.”

"God knows that the deepest reverence—" he interposed, greatly moved.

"It can do you no harm," she continued ; "it may do you good, though you, or I either, never know in what way ; though you, as I think will happen, never in this life see me again, though you forget you ever saw me. Oh, Major Beaumont, what have I done ? Indeed, there is nothing, nothing, to reproach yourself with."

She had risen when her passion took her and stood away from the trunk beneath the boughs, the green fans drooping just above her head, the wood blossom sweeping her skirts, leaf-shadows sliding over her, with her eyes brilliant, her lips crimson, a rosy spot on each cheek ; changing her posture with a slow and sweeping movement as she spoke, her hands clasping and unclasping, her head high, an inspired look upon her face, a deep and varying music in her voice. Beaumont had also risen and stood silent, sometimes making a movement towards her and then checking himself, as if vainly struggling with some emotion, until at last he approached her hurriedly with outstretched hands.

"I am yours," he said ; "yours absolutely, if you will take me—your husband, your friend, your servant, absolutely at your disposal, at your service, for as long as I live."

"No, no," she replied, suddenly calmed and putting away his hands. "Never so, never that. I spoke wildly ; that is my fault —always so headlong. You will forget this. We will part friends."

"But, indeed, we must never part. Let me try to heal what I have hurt by chance or some senseless folly. I will be honest. Love in the common sense of the word I cannot offer. I loved one woman once and she threw me over. But admiration, esteem, liking, I have to give, and they will grow. Let me endorse the letter that woke this feeling in you. I am bound in honour to do so since it is signed—however falsely—by my name."

"The letter is not to blame. It is fate, or something far above fate. It was long, long ago, when first we met—at first sight."

"But that was only last winter."

“Ah! then you have forgotten the first time—forgotten the four-leaved clover?”

“There is some magic in all this. A letter I am not aware of having written, meetings I have forgotten, and this mysterious clover. Can you be mistaking me for some other man, dear Miss Ludlow?”

“There is only one Hugh Beaumont in the Army-List. No, it is no mistake; magic, if you will—the strange natural magic that makes one human being the source and goal, the beginning and ending, of all the hopes and thoughts and affections of another. It is above all human control, whether it be an elemental force, like gravitation, or an impulse from purer spirit than ours, a chastisement from Heaven or a benediction—somewhat disguised. I will tell you all, Major Beaumont, if you will not be too much bored—the whole story. Eight years ago a very shy and raw girl, brought up rather oddly, went to her first dance; it was at Youngwoods: *how* frightened, *how* stupid, *how* ignorant of civilised ways she was, you cannot imagine. You asked her to dance—she had hidden herself in a corner like a frightened wild

creature ; and when she looked up at the voice, this shy, seventeen-year-old thing, she felt something flutter like a bird out of her own breast into another. She looked up like Elaine—see how much you may blame yourself ! This shy girl soon felt at her ease with you. You were kind and gentle to the wild thing, you talked to her as if she were a rational fellow creature, listened to her prattle, how it was her first dance, her first grown-up party—a sort of coming out for her. And you gave her a fresh-gathered four-leaved clover for luck. So she lived in a romantic poem all those eight years, and of all the men she met afterwards, none was ever more than comrade to her, because of that. But she never forgot ; she has the clover now, and when you rose up out of the shadows in the hall that evening last winter —ah ! you remember that. And that is all the story.”

“ It is a beautiful and wonderful story,” he replied gravely, as he bent over her hand and kissed it, “ a poem indeed ; but the hero was not Hugh Beaumont, dear Miss Ludlow ; it was an ideal named after him, the ideal of

a young girl's innocent and graceful fancy. You cannot know what a commonplace, un-heroic, faulty person the bearer of that name is, or the fairy poem would vanish at once. It is very sweet and gracious of you to have told me this. In return—a poor return, indeed—I will tell you that I felt very bad about the woman I once loved, and who played with me and then threw me over. So bad that, though she is long married to my friend, and I was recently thrown much with her again, I could not quite conquer my feelings. Then I tried to fix my hopes on some good woman who would marry me and preserve me from that temptation. But I could not care enough for any one. Last winter I was attracted by your cousin, and fancied that she cared for my attentions. But I soon found that she was only playing, so I gave her up and held to the appointment that puts all thought of marriage out of question for me. I think I gave that woman all the feeling of that kind I ever had to give, and I shall never be able to think of another quite in the same way. She absorbed all my feelings."

"Heartless creature," Marcia exclaimed

in her impulsive way. They were now walking up and down, sometimes looking into depths of translucent green spaced with purple shadow, sometimes across the village roofs and church spire, across downs dotted with sunny-fleeced sheep to azure bloom of sea fringed with silver surf; while the village clock chimed, the shadows shortened, birds hushed, and dews dried.

“Not heartless,” he corrected; “she made a mistake. I thought it hard lines on me. She was very beautiful and charming. Now, Miss Ludlow, somebody, as you said, must have written that letter, forging my name. Might I see it?”

“Yes—yes,” she hesitated.

She went quickly to the other side of the chestnut, then as quickly returned, the letter in her hand and a flush on her face. He took it with reluctance, divining whence it came, without the witness of its warmth. Then, resuming his place on the spur of the trunk, he read it carefully through, while she remained on the plank seat against the brown bole.

“The blackguard who did this,” he com-

mented, looking up when he had finished, "is a capable blackguard. He knows and has studied my writing ; he or she—it's too clever and diabolical for a man—knows me. But he or she must have some object in this. Think of the labour and invention and intrigue of all this. The paper to begin with could only have come from Nutcombe Place. Then who took it to Youngwoods ? That you might discover. I'll question the Nutcombe Place people about the paper and envelope. I always sign H. Beaumont or H. B. There's subtlety—for had I written such a letter as this, I might have given the full name. But here are a few lapses. See, I never cross t's like that, and the bows of my y's and g's are different. Ah ! look at this capital M. Not mine. Who makes such M's ? The insolence of asking *you* to *come here*, two miles and back before breakfast ! I'll unravel the mystery, Miss Ludlow, and the writer shall pay for this. I believe it's forgery."

"No, Major Beaumont, don't let him—for only a man could be so wicked—don't let him, her, it, or they, have the triumph of

success. Let us take no notice and leave them to form their own conclusions."

"If I could but have the author of this precious effusion in my hands for ten minutes," he said, "near Borman's goose-pond! By George! he'd remember it. But you are right. They must on no account score off us. Still, I should like to study this document at leisure, if you will allow me to keep it. I could submit it privately to an expert, a friend of mine. I should erase your name first, of course."

"And my reply? May I have it?" she asked, flushing.

Taking her letter from a breast pocket, he placed it silently in her hand. She could hardly bear to see it, her lip quivered as she drew it from the envelope and tore it across and across until the mossy ground was littered with the fragments.

"Stay," he petitioned, quickly picking up the pieces, "give me the rest. They might be trampled on."

She looked on with smarting eyes, for it was like witnessing the destruction of a soul, while he collected some dead leaves, made a

tiny pyre for the fragments, struck a match, lighted and burnt them carefully, and threw the ashes abroad away from the path, among bluebells, fading may-blossom, and the white lace bloom of wild parsley.

“So that is all ended and done, and good-bye,” she said gaily, as she turned away with a bow and a smile.

He followed her through the wood to the gate that opened upon the down, the church clock striking eight as they passed along the flowery way.

“I am so glad,” he said at the end of their conversation, holding some briars out of her way, “so glad that you won’t be unhappy over this diabolical trick. You are brave; they will never find out from you that the letter was acted upon.”

“No; I won’t be unhappy. I don’t like being unhappy. It does no good, and it ruins the complexion. Besides, unhappy people are always bores.”

Near the gate was a patch of delicate wood-sorrel, thought to be the true ancient shamrock, now in bloom. Beaumont, who was of Irish extraction, knelt on the grass

with an exclamation and gathered some of the pale green leaves with three folded hearts on a stem.

"Here is luck," he said, offering her a leaf with four hearts on it. "A four-leaved shamrock for you. May it bring you whatever you wish."

"Thank you," she replied, with a grave smile and a calm, thoughtful look that haunted him long after. "Thank you, and good-bye."

"For ever?" she asked herself with a pang, turning her head presently for one last quick look that found him still leaning over the gate, watching her.

CHAPTER VI

UNDER THE CHESTNUT

“I would that you were all to me,
You that are just so much, no more,
Nor yours nor mine, nor slave nor free !
I would I could adopt your will,
See with your eyes, and set my heart
Beating by yours—”

WHEN the deceived pair were out of sight, while the green arches were still tremulous and thrilling with all that had been spoken and felt beneath them while the sun increased the shadows east of the trunk by an hour, there was such a violent shaking and rustling of the mighty chestnut limbs as strewed the grass with falling blossom ; this was followed by two heavy thuds, and two men dropped from the branches and stood upon the spot where Marcia’s heart had been so treacherously laid bare and made to bleed. At the same time a young labourer, carrying hedging

tools, passed by a cross path within sight, whistling as he went and touching his hat to the gentlemen when he perceived them. They watched him in their turn till he was out of sight.

"I say," began the younger of the two men during their watching, "it was beastly mean. I feel such a blooming sneak."

"Revenge," replied the elder slowly, "is like revolutions, it cannot be done with rose-water."

"I'd a jolly good mind to drop down in the middle and blow the whole thing: it was too beastly mean for anything," grumbled the boy.

"They would have appreciated your delicacy and good taste, no doubt; and it would have accentuated your revenge."

"My revenge? I like that. When it was all your doing. I tell you what: Marcia may be a nuisance and know too much, and come the high and mighty over a chap, but she's a thoroughbred one and of first-rate quality for all that."

"Well," returned Borman impatiently, "all that was taken for granted. And, after all, she scored off us."

“Oh, rather! We were nowhere. She scored and he scored.”

“Damn *him*! Let him go the deuce in his own way, the brute. Women always choose the worst stick in the faggot. We’ve spent a pleasant and profitable and highly moral morning, my young friend. If it’s any satisfaction to you, I admit that we did a dirty thing, a blackguardly thing. I’m not the most moral of men—that brute of a lout is out of the way by this, we’d better go for the cycles before Beaumont comes back—but I never did anything quite so shady as this before. *She* scored and no mistake.”

They had slipped down through the underwood to the bottom of the glen, along which they now passed, scarcely seen among the greenery.

“Shall you drop in to breakfast at Youngwoods or at Nutcombe?” Willoughby asked, when they had reached the low wall by the road, over which they lifted the bicycles from their hiding-places in brambles. “I can’t face Marcia at breakfast: so you had better take Youngwoods, and I’ll see how Beaumont bears it at Nutcombe.”

"Just to make the meanness complete and pile up the dirt, eh? Exquisitely consistent. As I took leave at Youngwoods and was supposed to have gone away yesterday, there's no need for me to call again, least of all at breakfast."

"After all," returned Willoughby, "she ought to thank us. For we made him propose to her and she refused him."

But Borman was off at top speed, bending like a scorcher to the handle-bar.

"Refused him?" he echoed to himself. "Of course she refused him, and of course he knows how much that means. Why was I such an infernal ass? To throw them at one another's heads. I did for myself this time and no mistake. And I'd give all I'm worth for her now. I told her I never forgot a kindness. And I don't."

Beaumont remained at the gate till Marcia's figure was out of sight, and then slowly retraced his steps to the tree, where he sat on the bench with his head in his hands, and thought of what had passed with a whirling brain, lost in a world of fresh conditions and untested limitations.

An hour ago he had been animated by one supreme desire to extricate himself from a frightful and totally unforeseen position, with as little pain to Marcia as possible. He had succeeded beyond his most sanguine hope : there had been no distressing exhibition, no swooning, no hysteria, such as was to be dreaded. Nor had there been any difficulty in at once making the situation clear without brutality ; the surgeon's knife had done its work clear and clean, without faltering or undue pain. She had been quick to divine, even from his look, before he spoke, what was coming, and had accepted the position at once with perfect courage. He ought to have been very grateful, and yet he was not. It had been a strange adventure, a new and astonishing experience, a revelation of feminine character.

The green boughs, the mossed ground strewn with blossom and bordered by flowers, the sunshine, the shadow, all were eloquent of her ; he could see her still ; her face, the music of her voice, her words thrilling with strong passion, all lived before him. There

she had passed, and there, and there ; so the green boughs had arched above her, and the sunlight glided over her. There were some of the ashes of the letter—such a letter should not have been destroyed—and there—ah ! there lay the may and clover she had worn, faded and dying on the earth. He picked them up and placed them in his coat, remembering how he had picked her up herself from the ground and carried her in his arms, all drooping and lifeless like the flowers.

It was like some wild dream, bewildering, impossible ; a thing to wake from and wonder over and forget in the clear light of morning. Yet there was an intoxication in it, a mastering charm that must be mastered. For these things could not be true with waking daylight truth. The very birds sang magic music for simple wood notes ; glamour was everywhere, on wood and hill and sea.

At last he left the enchanted spot and went back to breakfast, and then to the large, cool library to the day's work, with the drooping may and clover in a glass of water in sight. But the work, though intricate and absorbing, did not absorb his thoughts as

completely as usual ; when not pursuing long and linked and complex calculations, it needed an effort, more or less, to concentrate the attention. In every pause, the reviving flowers in the glass attracted his eye and were cared about, their penetrating scent permeated plans and notes and maps and geometric problems, and when he broke off at luncheon time the scent followed him to the dining-room and pursued him back again to the library, where it was matter of interest, almost excitement, to see how the spray of hawthorn and the clover-heads had fared in his absence.

At four the thing had become unbearable ; at half-past he was in cycling dress, and by five, half a dozen miles away. When the lingering dusk of the May day was melting into night, and silvery stars were stealing out over the clear sky, people at Youngwoods saw the glowworm light of a solitary bicycle gleam along the road between the trees, and were not aware that the dusty cycler, wheeling slowly by and looking rather wistfully at their lighted windows, was any one with whom they were acquainted.

Marcia was playing an air from "Tristan und Isolde." The notes were but faintly audible from the road, and overpowered by the nightingale song, or *stroke* in the expressive German phrase.

For Beaumont there was work again deep into the heart of the night, till nature protested and the spell of the chestnut-tree melted before the potent wand of deep sleep, lasting well into the next day, when the spell returned at waking. But duty is duty; so he plunged again into the allotted tasks, defiant of all May morning spells and other sorceries. He knew very well that the glamour of this mingling of emotion and romance, sympathy and admiration, would pass, remembering how soon the Armida spell of the *Belle Dame sans Merci* had evaporated. Other enchantments had been woven round him and broken. And it was best so. None but a commonplace, tepid-souled woman would be happy with him, even were it possible, without dislocating his life and renouncing all his aims, for him to marry. What could a romantic, fiery-hearted creature like Marcia Ludlow do with an every-day person like

himself? Besides, he was too poor to think of marriage.

Nevertheless, he was greatly taken aback on calling at Youngwoods next day to find that Marcia had left in the morning.

“Marcia,” the *Belle Dame* explained, “is one of those casual people you never dream of reckoning upon unless you are fishing for a disappointment. That is why poor Jack has been in love with her for so many years. She keeps him dangling by her unexpectedness. She’ll surprise him some day by accepting him. Then he’ll recover. And they’ll probably marry and get over it like the rest of the world.”

“*Do* they ever get over it?” Beaumont asked rather dreamily, being occupied with the unsuitable prospect of Jack married to Marcia.

“Why, yes. One hears now and then of a suicide or case of lunacy,” Cecil Tyndall explained; “but the majority survive marriage, else where would the Divorce Court be?”

“Really?”

“Yes: it’s astonishing what the human

organism can endure," Mabel added. "Since my engagement, I call people 'human organisms'; it sounds scientific. Not that I know what an organism is; do you?"

"Perhaps not; but I know that some human organisms can endure a great deal," Beaumont replied, with a pathos that evoked a passing pang of remorse from Mabel.

Youngswoods had suddenly become uninteresting; the *Belle Dame's* cheerful observations were mentally stigmatised as flippant, even vulgar; much injustice was done to the Squire and Cecil. The piano was closed; it was just as well, for there was no one present to expound the beauties of Wagner. There seemed to be some doubt as to the exact whereabouts of Marcia Ludlow; her uncle said he thought she was going to join her brother at the Cape; one of the Vicarage girls confided to Beaumont her impression that "there was something between Miss Ludlow and Captain Borman, a sort of Beatrice and Benedick business." It was singular that they always came and went about the same time. They seemed made for one another, both so clever and so entertaining.

The thing was annoying ; all his thoughts were wanted for the business in hand ; there was no time to think of such trifles as flowers, women, and feelings. His grim chief would have no married men under him, that was understood. Yet the possibility of marriage must be thought out in leisure moments. Such moments were often spent under the chestnut boughs, where they linked themselves silently and imperceptibly into hours. And this was the tenour of those long-drawn reflections.

A woman, attractive, interesting, companionable, far above the average, had unintentionally been wronged by him ; how redress that wrong ? She was honestly and incredibly in love with him ; how compensate for that ? She had too much sense and spirit to pine and languish, to sit on a monument smiling at grief ; but she must indubitably suffer from her feelings. There must be deep sorrow, and that ought to be healed. There, as he paced the mossy ground, all snowed over with fallen blossom now, was the figure they had seen at the gate that May morning two fields distant, the figure of an old labourer,

cutting crimson trefoil and carrying it off in forkfuls on his bowed shoulders.

“Unhappy?” she had said. “Why be unhappy? Look at that old man; he may be unhappy. In that cottage by the roadside, where he is carrying the trefoil, his old wife lies dead; presently he will bury her and sit alone for the rest of his life. A few weeks ago his eldest son, a colour-sergeant of many years’ standing, was killed in a skirmish on the Indian frontier. Another son, a lifeboat-man here, was beaten to death by a heavy sea last winter; he was going along a life-line to a vessel aground on the ledge. His eldest daughter, who lives in the village, has a drunken husband, who beats her and starves her children; a younger girl is away in service in London; another son died of rheumatic fever a year ago. My poor old friend tells me, nevertheless, that he has much to be thankful for, and hopes to keep some years yet out of the workhouse. See how he bends under his load!”

Slowly now the figure passed and re-passed, bowed by the flowery burden, with

dragging steps and weary gait. The old wife must be under the ground now, the cottage empty and the hearth desolate. That was human tragedy—darkness shot with golden gleams. The figure was all the more pathetic for the beauty and gloom and sunlight framing it. Yet that old man had lived, had had his spring of youth and gladness, his sunny summer, his full-sheaved autumn; he could honestly say in the bitter storms ravaging his winter, that he had much to be thankful for. But this young woman saw her spring bloom ravaged in bud; what summer and autumn could be hers?

The figure vanished in the garden close, then issued again, unburdened, to pass once more bowed under the pile of fresh-cut trefoil, the lined and weathered face hidden by crimson blossoms and green leaves. Beaumont looked at him and then at the green roof with its brown ribs above.

Could he make this woman happy? Nature, for some immutable mysterious reason of her own, decrees that man only and never woman may ask and receive love as alms. Marcia must receive love as tribute,

not alms ; women are acknowledged to have that right, if no other. Setting that aside, he put himself in her place, pictured himself hopelessly loving that first woman who "threw him over." He pictured that loved woman, her heart given vainly to another man, pitying himself and giving herself in marriage to him out of pure compassion. How would that be for him ? Unbearable, absolutely unbearable. He had lost his love for her when she left him ; the renewed acquaintance after marriage had only been dangerous because, *because* he knew that she repented, knew that she had loved him after all.

There was the certainty of poverty in his marriage ; he had next to nothing and Marcia was slenderly dowered. No : it would not be well to foster the friendship and see what fellowship and closer acquaintance might promote between them. It would be kinder and wiser to let the dream die and the glamour fade. Hers was but a dream ; she had been awakened from it and recognised it as an air-built vision at best. A woman of such sterling good sense would

not allow herself to fall asleep and dream again ; she would at once face reality and master all such feelings as those fairylike girl-visions may have evoked ; then she might reward the patience of poor Jack Tyndall, or even that of the astute and fascinating Borman. It was at once wise and kind of her to indicate future relations between them, and strike the keynote of her own policy by leaving Youngwoods without delay. And if she went out to the Cape to her brother, that drastic proceeding could not but be followed with most beneficial results. Other skies, other surroundings, other faces, would raise a barrier between them : space is almost as good a healer and divider as time.

The green chestnut fans rustled in the summer breeze, some last flakes of blossom fluttered slowly down, hyacinth bells no longer swung their perfume abroad, but seeded in dull green pods ; the first bloom of the year was over, all trace of the ashes of that letter long gone. Yes, but some of the phrases remained warm and live in memory ; those written thoughts and feelings were not cold ash, but burning flame. Echoes of the

spoken words still rang through the darkened green of those waving leaves, the vision of a graceful figure still gleamed beneath the brown chestnut boughs in the gold glancing lights. Under the wide spread of the tree was enchantment, some strange Merlin spell had been cast upon it. What a disenchantment fuller knowledge of him would bring her! How unfit he was to fill the *rôle* her young and innocent dreams had given him! She was all poetry; her poetic nature had cast an unreal glamour upon his name. Life is made up of prose, not poetry—so he thought.

So he wrote a civil and friendly letter to "Dear Miss Ludlow," expressing regret at her unexpected departure from Youngwoods, and advising her not to miss the Wagner trilogy, now being given in London, for any horror of evening dress in afternoon sunshine or any pangs of dinner snatched between opera and opera of interminable but exquisite length—that is, if she were, as report assumed, in or near town at that date. The weather was not forgotten in this letter, or the war—there is always some sort of war for the

benefit of English correspondence and conversation ; or the news of the neighbourhood—golfing, cricket, dining, tennis. It was signed H. Beaumont, and the t's and y's and g's were all uniform and not various, as in the letter that had been so warm to the touch when returned to him as his own, and which he still kept. It contained this sentence by way of postscript : “ *The old man has been cutting more trefoil for his pony to-day.* ”

And this sentence seemed to the recipient the pith of the whole. It said itself over and over in her mind. Ah, that old man ; what a picture he called up ! The beauty of that unforgettable morning, the flooding light, the music, the life, the manifold bloom, the unfolding heart of Nature made manifest at the best moment, as near completeness as might be without the inevitable falling short and disappointment inherent to all earthly completeness, with just that grain of anticipation, that prophecy of something beyond, that is the crowning grace of all beauty and all joy. Evidently that sentence was unpremeditated, it insisted on writing itself, would

not be suppressed. "The old man has been cutting more trefoil for his pony to-day."

It was an idyll of Theocritean quality in itself, a picture such as Millet might have loved and drawn. She saw the lined and ruddy face, patient and grave, the grey hair, the labour-strained figure striding slowly along under the load of sweet-smelling trefoil, the shrewd, deep-sunken eyes looking up sadly from under crimson flowers and drooping leafage. The lonely cottage with its silence and sad memories was near, half buried in bloom, its diamonded lattices blinked cheerily in the sunshine; the knell would soon be heard tolling there, slow steps would pass through the sunny garden, bearing something heavy and black; the old man's own steps would follow, bearing something heavier still under his black coat. Afterwards he would come back to silence and solitude, and rise and go forth again in morning dews to his labour, not without prayer, and beautiful resignation, and daily uplifting of heart to the Eternal. Yes; there he was again. "To-day," the letter said, "cutting trefoil for his pony."

She saw the sea beyond him, blue and soft and meeting the sky where it was pale with excess of light, the downs with the sunny sheep softly moving, the long promontories, purple and green and black and yellow, the village and the grey spire half buried in trees. And the green roof of the chestnut shining with fairy turrets of blossom, the delicate green of wood-sorrel at the gate, the sweetness of morning over all; and through all, that face and that voice and the touch of the hand that gave the shamrock—face and voice and hand never to be forgotten any more.

She knew very well that the sorrows of others do not lessen our own, that the old labourer's troubles had no power to bind up other broken hearts; but his heroism was heartening, though dizzy and difficult to reach from the ground of new grief. Not unhappy? Well, not more unhappy than brave heart and strong will can help. But how be happy with that agony of longing—"flesh-consuming," the Greek poet calls it—that perpetual longing for a face, a voice, a hand that is ever absent? Wherever she went, she must see

that face and hear that voice, sleeping and waking, in sorrow and gladness, in sickness and in health ; vainly too would her hand ever long for the touch of that hand, and her thoughts desire response of that man's thoughts. For this is one of the great and strange and unthinkable mysteries of life, this overmastering, aching necessity of one human being to another, this never-stilled need ; for so Marcia knew it must be to the end. Is there any medicine to heal this, any narcotic to steep it in forgetfulness, except the long, lingering process of Time, the inevitable, silent effacement of all things in death and the darkness of the grave ?

Yes ; people get over such pain—often at the expense of the better self ; they forget, and forget with this all the charm and poetry of life, declining upon sensual, cynical, or worldly aims. Sorrow is sorrow : it must be borne, whether in the strength and hope of heaven, or the impotent despair of hell. There is one balm, but its growth is not of earth. Nor is any lot without gladness, as that old man confessed in the hour of his tribulation, while bending under his flowery

burden, glad of sweet liberty and labour in free air for another year to come.

Beaumont, who had indicated his next address in his letter, received in reply at no very distant date a civil note, consisting of gay nothings and cheerful banalities. Wagner's music was too much for human singers ; it tore the voice to pieces : but the trilogy was a thing to look back upon for a lifetime. Norman Néruda had excelled herself ; what inspiration in her face as she played, or rather drew the soul from the violin ! Never had the parks looked more beautiful. London surely grew fuller year by year and the Royal Academy less interesting. As a spectacle the Lyceum play was unsurpassed, and what teams the Four-in-hand Clubs mustered at their meets ! But it was really growing too hot. How did people live before ices were invented and ruffles and ceremonial abolished ? She was glad Major Beaumont had finished the duties that brought him to Nutcombe. She had not yet settled where to go next week, or made up her mind about the Cape, where, she was told, the climate was quite tolerable.

Yet the letter had taken two days to compose and was but the fittest survival of many. And though the writer had not made up her mind about the Cape, she had fully determined that, after what she had said in the heat of overmastering impulse at Nutcombe, it would be as unbecoming as embarrassing to meet her correspondent face to face. Writing is different.

CHAPTER VII

THE LUCK OF THE CLOVER PASSED ON

“The widest land,
Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine,
With pulses that beat double. What I do
And what I dream include thee—”

CURIOSLY disappointed by the perusal of Marcia's reply to his letter, Beaumont read it more than once and thought of it more than twice. But he persuaded himself that her letter was wholly delightful and wise and tranquillising ; it showed the writer to be gay and calm, interested in life, and determined to forget and ignore the singular and poetic episode of the chestnut-tree—just the effect she wished to produce.

That rude and painful shock might after all have done her good service ; it had fully roused her from her strange and baseless dream of himself, and, by showing her the

real man, had no doubt destroyed the ideal knight of her girlish fancy. Sensible and brave girl; her feelings would now be free for the next man who sued for them—that is to say, the next suitable man, if such were indeed discoverable in a world so commonplace as this, which appeared to Major Beaumont highly improbable. Still, she would be free and happy now, and he, Hugh Beaumont, by all logical rules ought to rejoice greatly.

But logic is not the prime mover of feeling or spring of conduct: the receipt of Marcia's letter was followed by a strong sense of the flatness, staleness, and unprofitableness in things sublunary. We have this sense at times and attribute it to the weather, indigestion, and other familiar bugbears. Beaumont attributed his own dreary mood to a combination of overwork and dyspepsia, and was on the point of taking rest and recreation, when an appointment, so brilliant and involving fresh work so important and absorbing in interest, was offered him, that he entirely forgot this precautionary measure and the uncomfortable feelings that preceded it, and started for the

north-west frontier of India after a few days wholly occupied in necessary preparations and hasty farewells.

His farewell to Marcia Ludlow was said in a hurried note, furnished with a postscript containing a request that she would send him for luck the four-leaved clover he had given her so many years ago, "providing you have not burnt it, as you probably have."

She was not at all sure it would bring him good luck, judging by precedent: it had brought her if anything a youth of loneliness and "waste dreams," culminating in a shock of bitter disappointment and leaving her in a position that most women consider the acme of mortification. But a man going on active service can be refused little; besides, if there were any wizardry in the token she had worn so long, it was of the nature of the magic in Oberon's little western flower. Yet it cost her a pang to part with it, though the Nutcombe shamrock replaced it; after all, the four-leaved shamrock deserved something in exchange, and that hasty request subjoined to the hurried note doubtless meant Good-bye: let the dead past bury its dead; break

the amulet that worked such harm ; tear out the blotted page and begin another fresh and free. So the dry, dead leaf was taken from its old-fashioned crystal locket set with pearl, and enclosed in an envelope with the date and the words "Good luck and good-bye. M.L." The envelope was hurriedly opened on the day of sailing, and the four words having been glanced at with mingled mortification and relief, it was put aside and forgotten.

Forgotten by the recipient, but not by the giver, no more than the basil-pot was forgotten by Isabel. She had cherished her treasure so long, so many beautiful dreams had been woven about the four heart-shaped leaves, so many pure thoughts had breathed their delicate aroma about it, she had worn it enclosed in its crystal through so many years. And now it was gone. The drama was played out. And youth was gone and hope with it. She knew now that she had always expected the giver of the clover to come and redeem it—*one day*. He was like the pre-destined knight Britomartis saw in the magic crystal. So they would meet, or so, or so.

she had dreamed. Then he would pluck the Hesperean fruit that had been slowly ripening so long unseen, and be glad. Because he was the only one, and harmony must prevail in a fair and well-ordered world.

But it had not been so. He came, but not to redeem the pledge, only to take it back. Might he have thought thus to take back with it the feeling that had gone with it, and so free her from what was consuming her? Doubtless, he had some such kind thought wrapped up in a little harmless superstition. He had discovered her treasure without desiring but not without appreciating it; he recognised its worth, but wished it away and herself scatheless and free. That proved him the true and noble knight of her dreams.

But he was gone.

She had known the dream-knight in flesh and blood reality, had seen him eye to eye, had shared his thoughts and studied his character, and found the reality more beautiful than the dream. Under the chestnut-tree she had seen deep, deep into his soul; they had come very near to each other on that morning. Who could forget words

such as he had spoken there in the true chivalry that is not afraid of truth, the manliness that shrinks from nothing but wrong? A sweet and noble friendship had been born in that sunshiny hour among the bluebells, from the ashes of the dream of her youth. The sting had been taken from the pain, the bleeding heart bound up; she had schooled herself to be grateful for this growing friendship; it was enough. But he was gone, gone to the ends of the earth, through tropic heat and mountain snows and savage enemies, to fever and wounds, toil and hardship, perhaps to his death. And she might not even weep and ease her heart. Even if he lived through the peril and hardship of that campaign, would he remember her? Scarcely, there was so much to fill his thoughts and strain his energies in the command of the expedition she read of with such pride and interest.

A woman's lot is very hard, she mused, while accompanying the cousins with whom she was staying to dinners and dances, crushes and concerts, always gay and bright and full of quick sayings and apt retorts—

yet somewhat thinner and larger-eyed than before.

Jack Tyndall was often with her at this time, solicitous of her pleasure and comfort, and sometimes speaking with a tenderness that must have divined the heartbreak in her eyes.

Once he said, "Won't you tell me?" and she replied, "No, not even you; but please take no notice." Then they spoke of the north-western expedition and its chances, and Jack said,

"You remember Beaumont, don't you?"

"Oh! yes," she replied, "I remember him quite well. He stayed on at Nutcombe after Whitsuntide."

"It's a grand chance for old Beau," Jack added, "a major of infantry at his age—he's a little over thirty, don't you know—to have such a command. His work at Nutcombe was probably about this business. I remember the books he was using, and I saw some maps of those provinces. He has nearly always had Staff appointments and been on special service. We shall hear more of old Beau by-and-by, providing he doesn't get

himself spitted on those nasty knives of theirs, or sniped from behind a rock, or tumbled down a precipice, or frozen to death, or baked up with fevers and agues, or poisoned by native princes."

"Oh, Jack, let us go in. It is so cold out here," cried Marcia, shivering.

"Those frontier people are so treacherous," added Jack, gloomily, while he adjusted the wrap more warmly round her shoulders; "and dear old Beau is so much too frank and trustful to cope with them. Now, that's where Borman excels—he's so subtle. He knows how to treat those wily Orientals. Borman doesn't stick at trifles. He did some queer things when on intelligence service, if all they say is true. He can imitate handwriting among other accomplishments."

The cousins, who had been on a balcony in the summer moonlight, Jack having come to dine at the uncle's house, were now in the drawing-room with others; but Marcia had suddenly become more interested in the conversation.

"Isn't that rather a doubtfully useful accomplishment?" she asked.

“Not for the sort of detective work he had to do at that time. Once some one bet him something he couldn’t imitate a handwriting at first sight. He took the bet and began with me. My writing is pretty crabbed, I think you’ll own. I wrote half a dozen lines about nothing and signed them, and he instantly did a dozen given lines from Macaulay in the same hand, signature and all. Three other men wrote something, and he did the same by them all and won his bet. It is quite an art.”

“Yet his own hand is distinctive and characteristic,” added Marcia, who was thinking as hard as she could, and changing colour as she thought.

Then Jack remembered that Willoughby had made some mysterious hints to him as to some mischance that had befallen Marcia in some misty connection with Borman, and remembered, with this, sundry suspicions of Mabel’s that Marcia’s flouting and snubbing of Borman was, after all, of the nature of Beatrice’s disdain for Benedick. Benedick was a soldier too. He seemed to see it all now. Borman had taken Marcia at her

word and left her, and she was grieving for him. The ways of women are strange and mystifying to the mere male.

So the next time he had a chance of speaking privately with his cousin, he asked what Willoughby had done to her.

"He's awfully sorry," he added, "it seems to weigh on his conscience."

"But what unsuspected sins has Willoughby been confessing to you?" she asked in great amazement. "I try to keep the boy in his proper place, and he resents it, that is all. There has been no offence and no quarrel."

"It has something to do with Borman. And it was through some fooling of Willoughby's own, he says."

"Willoughby says that?" echoed Marcia, crimsoning. "Dear Jack, tell me exactly what he says."

"That's just what I can't; he's so mysterious. He swears you are the best woman under the sun, and wishes he hadn't done it, and calls himself a beast and a sneak, and then says, 'For the love of Heaven don't let out anything, especially to Borman,

though Borman would do anything for her. He'd sell his soul, if he thought he had one to sell, for her sake.' Dear Marcia," Jack added after a pause, during which her face had expressed many shades of emotion, though her lips were mute; "did you do well to send him off? Wouldn't it be advisable to whistle him back? You've only to hold up one finger and he'll fly to you like a shot."

"Ah, Jack," returned Marcia, with a smile he could not understand, "how little you know of character, especially of your fair cousin's. That is the last thing in the world for me to do. Whistle him back? No, no, not I. Did you, dear Jack, did you ever hear a little lyric in which our grandmothers unburdened their souls, a charming lyric, called 'Strangers yet'? Because, were you your own grandfather, I should think you had inspired it."

"Well, dear," rejoined the trebly blind Jack, "whatever the complexity of your character or density of my stupidity, don't throw away any chance of happiness, that's all. Don't cut off your nose to spite your

face. And count upon me to put things straight, if you want it."

"Thanks. I will cut off no noses and spite no faces, if only to please you, you splendid, dear old Jack."

"*Who makes M's like that?*" she seemed to hear Beaumont asking under the chestnut-tree, and she answered to herself, "Norris Borman, the clever penman, who imitates handwriting at sight. Norris Borman, who smiled so sweetly the night I knocked him into the mud and told me he never forgot a kindness."

She remembered the grin on Willoughby's face the morning he got up so early and saw her take her letters from the hall table. So Willoughby was the bearer of that apocryphal missive; no doubt, Willoughby had read it and chuckled over it with a boy's savage delight in mischief. She must have made excellent sport for that pair of Philistines. They would have taken care to see if their excellent epistle was acted upon. Ah! but they didn't know *him*, they were incapable of imagining the chivalry and nobility of heart that turned bitterest sorrow and deepest

humiliation into the brightest memory of a life. Nor did they dream of the double charm of the clover and the shamrock.

Borman had, as she supposed, left the neighbourhood the day before the tryst he so considerately arranged was kept, since when she had not chanced to meet him; but, of course, Willoughby had been set to report upon the success of their plot, which had evidently kindled a tardy remorse in the boy's heart. Perhaps there had been pain on her face at breakfast on that dreadful morning after the meeting, though she had laughed and jested as usual, and brought home a great bunch of hyacinths to account for her early ramble.

In September she was again at Youngwoods, where Mabel's approaching marriage filled the air with a subdued mingling of change and parting, festivity and prose. Willoughby was there in the new and strange character of an affectionate and docile squire, anticipating her wants, watching her like a faithful dog, with a curious tenderness in his manner, that filled his father with amazement.

“What have you done to him, my dear?”

he asked. "He's not the same boy. You can turn him round your finger."

"He's casting the slough of his boyish savagery, Uncle Harry," she replied; "he's growing a man, that's all. I was always fond of poor old Willie."

She certainly appeared fond of him in these days, and always seemed glad for him to ride with her, or cycle, or carry her clubs up to the breezy links on the down. They had many discussions, and in all their differences her words were received with the deference due to uncontested superiority. This was the case even in discussing the progress of the frontier expedition, respecting which Willoughby's military studies might reasonably be supposed to give him some advantage in judging and explaining the course of events.

"What an ovation Beaumont will have when he comes home," was a favourite winding up of some such discussion: "K.C.B., M.G.O., and goodness knows what. He ought to have had the V.C. after Egypt."

"It must be very trying," Marcia would reply, "to these distinguished soldiers to see

themselves vulgarised by penny-a-liners and music-halls, and to have to face all the horrors of notoriety and popularity,—these city banquets, and swords of honour, and cheers and 'Good old Bobses' of the crowd. Fancy a man so sensitive as Major Beaumont being called 'good old Bobs.' I think I see him run for his life to escape all that."

" Soldiers don't run : they learn to stand fire," Willoughby would loftily observe. " Beaumont will stand to his guns ; trust him."

" When he led that assault on the Murghai Pass," Marcia said one day after some such discussion, speaking low, with a soft smile of mingled reverence and exultation, " he had a fresh wound only a day old and some fever. Oh, Willoughby, how does it feel to have a bullet in the shoulder? Fancy being weak and giddy from loss of blood, and pain and fever, and *yet* doing all that!"

" Plenty of grit in *him*," Willoughby assented. " Then there's the fun of the thing and the go of it."

" Fortunately it was the left," Marcia continued, absently looking away to the sea, her

thoughts wholly filled with the possible pain and inconvenience of a bullet in the left shoulder.

"Those bullet wounds are often very clean," said Willoughby in an encouraging voice; "they don't hurt a bit and heal up in no time."

"I wish," continued Marcia, carefully placing her golf ball and measuring the distance with her eye as she prepared to drive, "I wish telegrams had never been invented."

Yet she never missed reading every one from any source, authenticated or hearsay, that bore upon the frontier expedition. She knew as much as can be known from books about the climate, history and topography of those mountain districts: those peaks and passes and sheltered valleys were the background to her daily thoughts and nightly dreams; and the feeling, at first so strange and unsettling, that death might at any moment have ended all earthly possibilities for him whose face and voice and touch were missed at every moment, had now acquired the calm of habitual sorrow. It was the first thought on waking,

the last before sleeping ; it ran through all the wild entanglement of dreams, and coloured every occupation of waking moments ; it gave a brooding mystery to her eyes at their brightest smiling, and imparted reserve and restraint to her most cordial manner. So persistent was this aching dread, that every glance down the newspaper column lighting upon his name as a living man was like a reprieve, and brought a flush of joy and deep breaths of relief.

One letter, just to report his arrival and acknowledge the coming of the clover, reached her. It spoke of the voyage, which he knew she had made herself, the colour of the sea here, the look of the land there, the heat in the Red Sea, and the probable greater heat of the journey up the country. "Oh, you happy people at home," it said, "with your cool fresh nights, your breezes and rains, and greenery and flowers, and your luxurious grumble at 80 in the shade, oh ! the shade—deep and cool and moist—of spreading chestnuts and mossy wood-paths. And that old man may still be cutting trefoil in the dew."

This was worth pages of wit and eloquence, of description and comment; it was a poem that Marcia soon had by heart. Yet the whole letter was contained in one page and began and ended in the most conventional manner, and nothing was said of the magic clover beyond a civil acknowledgment of its receipt. Nor was there any hint of further correspondence, any future address given or asked.

Yet the world moved and life went on. Mabel married her professor with much propriety and fashionable clothes, and bridesmaids, among whom was Marcia, in a broad and plumpy hat, carrying a perfect bush of flowers trailing to the very ground. Flags stretched across the village road, the church bells rang as cheerfully as three can, the school children scattered flowers, had a holiday and much plum cake, and the old people had beef and beer. The old man of the clover field was too young for the bridal beef and beer; but Marcia carried him a slice of wedding cake next day, and had a long chat with him on many subjects, not excepting the frontier expedition, in which he was keenly interested, though not always well informed.

"This here war heartens anybody up," he commented; "it's summat to think on now my poor bwoy's gone. Mis'able good scholar he was. 'S mother she'd hread his letters out to me, after she'd a-spelled 'em drough herself fust. There warn't all this here book learnen when she and me was young. But I can maäster to hread print, if I taäke my time and it is easy hwrote like the Bible."

She was growing very fond of old Adams, she told her friends at Youngwoods when rallied upon this intimacy; he was a most intelligent and upright man. And now that there was a prospect of her spending more time at the Grange in the absence of Mabel, she would cultivate her cottage friend's society.

One cloudy afternoon in October, when the wind whistled chill and shrill through the thinned leafage, and the brooding melancholy of approaching winter was over wood and field, Marcia was at Nutcombe Place, having a casual chat with its lady, hearing all about the children, and the recent yachting tour, and the telescope that kept Lord Sharland so often from his bed through the now lengthening nights. They were chatting very cheerily.

by a blazing wood fire that made the outdoor gloom and chill a luxury, Lady Sharland in a long chair cosily invalidish, Marcia on the hearthrug with the children, when Lord Sharland came in and Marcia assumed a more conventional posture, discovering that it was time to go ; whereupon he said that he would like to go a little way with her, she had not said a word to him yet.

“I didn’t come in before,” he confided to her in the park, “because I wanted Evelyn to have her little woman’s chat alone with you ; it does her good, poor child.”

“I can’t say I think her in excessive need of pity. She’s not a widow, though she anticipates being one if you spend many more nights in astronomy. Nor has she a particularly bad husband or very horrid children. Nor is she entirely without visible means of subsistence. These eyes beheld a large plum cake——”

“Ah ! that’s just it, Miss Ludlow,” he broke in, with an indulgent smile. “You are so gay. I’m old and over grave for her ; the society of a happy careless girl like yourself is so wholesome for her. She’s not—ah—

not very strong just now. She—ah—couldn't stand a shock. She's affectionate and particularly fond of this cousin of hers," he continued, while they stepped briskly on beneath the groaning, sighing trees, through a rain of blown leaves and Marcia's pulse began to quicken on their approach to the head of the glen, where the chestnut stood and a man's voice sang in her memory :

"If she love me, this beleeve,
I will die ere she shall grieve."

"The cousin?" she wondered absently, thinking of Andrea del Sarto's words : "Again your cousin's whistle? Go, my love."

"I want you to break it gently to her," Sharland added. "Barton picked up a special later edition of a morning paper in the town and sent a messenger straight to me with it, first telegraphing. He's so considerate. Here it is," drawing a paper from his pocket and fluttering it out on the wind, scantily observed by his companion, who was looking at the cold brownness spreading over field and down, and the grey of a low sky meeting a pearl-grey sea ridged with silver,

and thinking of the crimson trefoil once blooming in yonder brown fallow. "It was a surprise, an ambush—such a guerilla business as is usual in those mountain fastnesses, and poor Beaumont——"

He was startled and silenced by a sharp cry, and looked up when Marcia clutched his hand. "Not Hugh Beaumont? What of Hugh Beaumont?" she cried, in a voice that cut into his heart.

"It was a gallant death," he replied gravely; "he was a brave man, a fine soldier, a sweet and noble gentleman."

She had snatched the paper from him and stumbled, white-faced and wild-eyed, to the chestnut-tree, where she fell upon the rough seat with her face against the rugged trunk, struggling with difficult breathing.

"Great Heaven," cried Sharland, kneeling by her and trying to take a hand that was cold as death through its glove. "What have I done? Why, he was here in the spring, and you must have known him."

"Known him?" gasped Marcia, sitting up with a dizzy look in her wild eyes. "Oh, yes; I knew him, knew him. Yes; he was

here, here in the spring, under this very tree. The sunlight was upon him. It was the time of bluebells—the chestnut bloom was fading. Yes ; he sat there on that root-spur and we read the letter. There he made the fire. ‘A sweet and noble gentleman.’ And they have killed him. He heard me say that I loved him. He heard me say that he was worth any woman’s love—and they have killed him —him ! He stood there under the bough, his eyes were full of tears, he asked me to take him, ‘until I die,’ he said. And he is dead.”

Sharland saw that she was scarcely conscious of anything but her love and her loss ; there was a mist over the eyes that gazed straight before her ; she clasped the paper, still unread, tightly in her hand ; some dead leaves whirling by were in her hair, some drops of rain on her face.

“ My dear,” he said very tenderly at last, “ I am so sorry. We all loved Hugh Beaumont. He had so many sterling qualities. I heard of him in high quarters only last week. Such a promising soldier, such an accomplished man. He is a loss to the country. Oh ! my dear child, if you would but cry.

Don't smile like that. It was the death he would have chosen. Trust me and tell me all, is your engagement known?"

"There is no engagement," she replied, "and nothing is known. What shall I do?"

"Poor child, poor dear child! Your secret is quite safe with me. You ought not to be here. It is cold and will soon be dark. There's rain in the sky."

"It was morning and the sky so blue," she muttered, the dazed look returning to her eyes.

"Let me read it to you, just what is known," he said, taking the paper from her tight clutch and uncrumpling it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CLOVER MISSING

“I dare not let it languish,
Dare not indulge in memory’s rapturous pain :
Once drinking deep of that divinest anguish,
How could I seek the empty world again ? ”

IT was a sad day’s work for Sharland, whose kind heart was ill fitted for the sight of other people’s sorrow, and who, like many undemonstrative and strong-natured men, cherished an especial tenderness for women and womanly griefs. Marcia, in the sudden passion of agony he had unintentionally evoked from her, seemed to him like some exceedingly fragile and precious thing that might break in handling. But he could not leave her, though he knew that she was beyond human comfort.

He read out the brief and tragic paragraph from the paper, and saw that her mind fully

grasped the sense of the meagre information ; then he urged her to go home, offering a carriage, which she declined.

But when she tried to rise, her limbs trembled beneath her ; she found herself quite powerless, like one who has been long ill, and so fell back against the tree, to the extreme discomposure of her host. Suddenly bethinking himself of the summer-house close by, he hurried away to it, and, after a little search, found some light sparkling wine that had been left there unopened from some luncheon or some other light refection, such as was often taken up there in the coolness. Coming out with this, he caught sight of a man at work farther off, and despatched him to the stables to send a carriage round to the road at the foot of the dell. Then, having prevailed on Marcia to drink a generous draught of wine, he took her up like a child and carried her down through the dell, till she begged to be set down, finding herself sufficiently restored to walk.

“ Don’t tell Evelyn,” was her one petition, when the carriage appeared and she wished him *good night*.

"Not till you wish it," was the reply, as he shut the door and signalled to the coachman to drive off.

Arrived at Youngwoods, she pulled the string and discharged the men outside the gate, sufficiently conscious of herself to decide that it would attract less attention if she returned, as she had started, on foot, and so dragged herself wearily along the avenue under the thinning limes, beneath whose summer tops she had walked with Beaumont in the moonlight so few months ago.

Fallen leaves driven by chilly gusts leapt lightly against her, singly and in multitudes, with a sound like a sobbing sigh ; branches cracked overhead as the tree-tops rocked in the blast ; the moan of the sea was audible in its sullen under-draught down the shingle. She seemed to hear through all Borman's song :

"A lightsome eye, a soldier's mien,
A feather of the blue,
A doublet of the Lincoln green,
Was all of me you knew, my love,
Was all of me you knew."

Yet they had walked there five months ago in the magic of that moonlit night. *But he*

could not remember that or anything any more ; because man goes to his long home, and all his thoughts perish. At least, so it seems in the first sharp ache of bereavement. It is only afterwards that hope in the beyond awakens.

Warm light was pouring through the hall windows in the rapidly-deepening dusk : light or shade, heat or cold, all now were alike ; only the instinct to conceal pain and emotion remained. So when, stepping into the warm brightness, she heard voices and saw a group chatting round the fire, she made an effort to appear as usual, and said something of having dawdled on the road and been belated, an effort nearly frustrated by the sight of Willoughby with a look of mingled commiseration and remorse on his face, and that of Norris Borman with an unusual expression on his.

They were in full discussion, Mrs. Tyndall tearful, the Squire grave. Captain Borman had been so considerate and kind, the former explained ; being on his way down to dine and sleep at his sister's, he had driven on to Youngwoods expressly to break some sad

tidings just received at the War Office—tidings that would, her aunt was sure, cause Marcia great concern—about poor Major Beaumont whom they all liked so much.

“Yes?” Marcia returned in a tired voice; “then you know? I heard it this afternoon at Nutcombe. They are relatives, you remember. Evelyn has been a little out of sorts, and her husband asked me to break it gently to her.”

“Ah! to be sure,” commented the Squire. “The cousins were attached to each other, and poor Beaumont was at Nutcombe in the spring. We saw a good deal of him then. Wasn’t he at our dance? Well, poor fellow, he had the satisfaction of knowing that the object of the expedition was accomplished before he fell.”

“It was an open secret,” added Borman, “that, though nominally second in command, he was the brain and heart of the mission. Stanhope did nothing without consulting him. He had the highest opinion of Beaumont. He asked for him; he would have him. Beaumont probably organised the whole thing. After all, he had luck,

considering his short service and the bigness of this command."

"But oh! the piteousness of it," added his sister, Mrs. Grenfell, "to achieve so much, to go so far on such an exceptionally brilliant career, and then to die just in sight of success."

"Won't you sit down, Miss Ludlow?" Borman was hurriedly asking Marcia, who declined the chair he brought and continued to lean on a heavy Chippendale chair, her arms resting on the high back, her face white and still.

"As my brother says, not everybody has the luck of bringing his talents into play. And then the treachery, the cruelty! It was not like falling in action."

"Those native tribes are so savage," added Mrs. Tyndall. "Imagine the horror of being picked off in cold blood by some dark fiend behind a rock or a bush."

Marcia heard it all, leaning upon her chair-back in the full light, always conscious of a white face lying unburied beneath the stars and sun at the foot of a precipice in the fatal mountains; a white face, still and cold,

scarred, perhaps, she knew not how, and a body crushed. She heard all without sign of emotion ; nothing seemed to matter now, all meaning and all possibility being gone out of life and the world being empty and black. What could add to this great grief, that the one voice was for ever still, the one heart for ever cold, the face always seen in longing and memory for ever gone ? What was there to fear when, whatever befell her, he could never know ? What to hope, when he could have no more part in any earthly thing ?

Only she felt so strangely tired, with a feverish desire for a long, long sleep : the faces and figures before her were dreamlike and unreal, the voices hollow-sounding and mysterious ; the familiar hall, so unfamiliar, so unlike the bright and cheery reality it had possessed on that winter evening when she came home with Jack, and a tall and knightly figure rose out of the shadows so unexpectedly that joy rushed upon her like a flood and she fell lifeless at his feet—to be raised in his arms.

She saw Willoughby's face of pity and

compunction and the tears that he winked back with difficulty, but she did not care; nor did it hurt her to recognise that Borman knew of this knell to all her happiness. If she had had any thought of him, it would have been that he was exulting in her pain; he might exult, it could not concern her. But Borman was in reality cut to the heart by the knowledge of her suffering; he was feeling honestly ready to give years of his life to save her this sorrow; it was the highest level of feeling he had ever reached or thought he could reach; no woman had ever moved him like this; the words she had spoken under the chestnut-tree rang still in his memory like a chime of golden music, poignant in a pathos that was sharper-pointed by a sense of his own baseness and cruelty.

They spoke of those who would mourn the slain man, held it fortunate that he was not married, presumably not even engaged. "Though who knows but some woman may be breaking her heart for him this very day?" Mrs. Tyndall added, rejoicing that he had no mother to miss him.

"But his father is living," said the Squire,

"a very old friend of mine, though we seldom meet now. He was in the Lancers and retired with the rank of Colonel; he lives near Bournemouth. Hugh is one of many sons: one fell in Egypt and one in the Zulu war; there are some daughters as well, I fancy."

"Such unconsidered trifles don't count, of course," added Mrs. Grenfell. "Dear Mr. Tyndall, I sometimes wonder what you male creatures think we are made of. My husband will undoubtedly say, of 'unpunctuality,' unless I run away at once. The carriage must have come ages ago, and it's no joke to face a dinnerless man savage with deferred hunger. Marcia dear, you are not yourself to-day. Tired? I daresay you are feeling this about poor Major Beaumont—why are you pinching me, Norris? Why, of course, I remember now, you met him here in the spring. Look us up soon, child. I've heaps of things to say to you."

"Tell me about Colonel Beaumont, Uncle Harry," Marcia said, when they had gone, bearing Willoughby in their train: "is he an old man? was he very fond of this son?"

“A father is a father and a son a son, Marcie. I’m glad Jack didn’t choose the service—when I hear these things. Beaumont is about half a dozen years my senior ; he saw a good deal of service ; was in India a good deal : snow-white hair and moustache ; a fine old fellow, erect and precise, quite of the old school. Oh, yes ; I believe there are two or three surviving sons—one a clergyman, married, of course—clergymen always marry. Then Gerald,—what became of Gerald ? I fancy he’s in the Civil Service. Then there was Algy ; yes, Algy went to the Bar, didn’t he ? That accounts for six, reckoning the three soldiers. There must be another somewhere, but I can’t quite place him. I ought to write to poor Beaumont, but what can one say ? It’s like touching a raw place. I’d rather not be condoled with myself in such a case.”

“How one misses young faces,” the Squire said rather dolefully at dinner half an hour later, as he looked across a desert of flowers and lights to his wife at the other end of the table. “Mabel was a miss, but—ah ! well, my dear, you know Marcia is so gay, a host

in herself. What does she mean by having headaches? She never was that kind of girl. Ten to one she's only wanting her dinner, and the headache would go away with the soup and a good glass of wine. I hope little Marcie isn't going to begin invalidish ways."

"She walks too far, I think. Her mind is active and she can't drowse away her days here in this dull place. Very different from Mabel. So she visits the cottagers, and golfs and cycles, and rides and walks from morning till night. No wonder she wears herself out. A quiet evening in bed will set her up. Yes, the young faces brighten us up wonderfully, my dear. But you must be content with the old wife and a dull game of back-gammon to-night."

But there was no Marcia at breakfast next morning, nor at luncheon. She only wanted to lie still; she had over-tired herself; a day in bed was good for nerves, only let her lie the clock round and she would be as fresh as a lark to-morrow; a prediction hardly verified by her appearance at breakfast the second day, heavy-eyed and somewhat pale, but quite ready to go to church.

According to Sunday custom, in fine weather they walked by the short field way to Nutcombe Church, meeting or passing many a cottage neighbour, and lulled by the drowsy chime of the three bells, the caw of rooks, and distant sea-murmur. Marcia's face quivered when they turned into the road and met the Sharlands, who were emerging from a gate in the park wall immediately opposite the churchyard. There was some conventional reference to a sad event, cut short by Sharland's somewhat advanced views as to the lateness of the hour or rather moment, and the anxiety of little Gwenny to show her new birthday prayer-book to Miss Ludlow, who was thinking of last Whitsun Eve in that church. She had been decorating it all alone, according to a stipulation of her own, and had come to an end of Marshal Niel roses and lost her attendant boy, when Beaumont, passing and seeing the door open, went in, learnt her want, and himself supplied it ; and then, hearing her aversion to talking in church, undertook to do the boy's part without an unnecessary word, so that a singularly pleasant and peaceful hour had

been passed in silence in the cool dim building, sweet with lilac, roses, and wall-flower.

A funeral hymn had been chosen for this October morning, and the vicar felt it incumbent upon him to preach an appropriate sermon on the heroic and untimely death of one who had not so long since worshipped in that holy house, and was known to them all, especially by his kindness at the children's last Whitsun sports. The organist played the congregation out with Chopin's pathetic Funeral March, and there were grave and even tearful faces and much discussion of the manner of poor Beaumont's death in the churchyard and along the road.

"I minds en well," the old man of the clover was saying as Marcia passed him. "A pleasant-spoken gentleman. Many a time he'd pass me the time o' day. He give me some rare good tobacco, a girt passel of it. And now he's gone, zaäme as my poor bwoy."

In due time all the illustrated papers with indifferent prints and brief biographies of Beaumont reached Youngwoods, and after

being handed round, discussed, and consigned to oblivion and waste-paper baskets, were secretly mutilated of those notices, which were preserved under lock and key in the pretty bedroom that looked down the avenue.

The days wore on. Marcia went cub-hunting with her uncle, and cycling alone; she dined out and received guests at home, and often passed under the chestnut-tree on visits to Nutcombe Place, where a new addition to the nursery had to be welcomed and Lady Sharland's seclusion beguiled. But when Mr. and Mrs. Tyndall went away for a fortnight, leaving her solitary at the Grange, it was a great relief; she did no unnecessary thing, but sat still, resting by day and weeping by night.

Jack came for the first hunting week and found a ready companion in the field and a cheerful opponent at billiards afterwards. Christmas brought the married couple, the three sons, and all the usual charities and hospitalities, hollies and mistletoes, and a dance at which Marcia caused much disappointment by having another headache. By this time it became evident that she was

not quite strong; change of air was suggested. The Sharlands projected a Mediterranean cruise later on, and it was stipulated that Marcia should be of their party, which was to include only the husband, wife and children, with attendants. But no one suspected what was thinning her cheek and marking heavy shadows under her eyes, except three who knew.

The *Foam-bell* sailed early in February, having amongst its crew a white-faced woman, who could scarcely drag her limbs for weariness, and passed her time reclining in a low chair on deck or on a sofa in the saloon, and took no interest in anything, and concerning whom Lady Sharland would have been much troubled, but that her husband assured her that this prostration was a phase in the direction of recovery.

“She needs quiet, let her be,” was the order, gladly acquiesced in by the patient.

When the *Foam-bell* lay off Naples in early March, Marcia received a telegram, signed “N. Borman,” that roused her from this long apathy, to this effect :

“Official intelligence Beaumont found.”

She carried this to her cabin without imparting its contents to her friends, and remained some hours alone there. Later in the day she wrote to Borman at his sister's address, thus :

“ You hideously cruel man, when will you cease to persecute me? Happily I shall soon be beyond reach of further cruelties, where the wicked cease from troubling, and wish to be in charity with all before I go. You said, after I tried to rescue the poor dog, that you would remember it—you never forgot a kindness. Surely your vengeance should be glutted by this time. I refuse to rise to the cruel bait of your telegram.”

When she joined her friends on deck before sunset that evening, there were marks of tears on her face, and when spoken to, she answered vaguely, as if deeply preoccupied. So when Evelyn had gone below, her husband took her place by their guest, and asked in his deep voice and grave manner, how many months had passed since he had surprised the secret of her sorrow from her, a subject to which he had never since then referred.

“ Five,” was the startled reply.

“ Five months—over twenty weeks, nearly half a year,” he repeated; “ and you are twenty-six years old. Five months. My dear child, that is enough time to waste, enough time in which to pick oneself up after the most terrible shock and begin again. Every life has its duties, Marcia. You must bear this pain.”

“ The reproof is just,” she acknowledged. “ You have been most kind and patient, and I so weak and wearying. But I did keep it all in at first.”

“ And I thought you so brave and strong. Do you ever pray?”

“ Ever? Always.”

“ And yet repine?”

“ It’s not that. Indeed, I try to—bear it. It’s having no one to—to tell it to, to be all shut up and restrained, that is so wearing. My mind is so tired and my body too. Let me rest a little, please, just a little longer.”

“ Minds can’t rest except relatively. Why don’t you learn astronomy? I had a trouble something like this once, Marcia. So I threw myself into astronomy and the higher

mathematics, and recovered. That is to say became able to bear it."

"She died?" Marcia asked with sudden interest.

"Was burnt to death," came with lowered eyes and bated breath. "You see my married life," he added quickly; "it is an exceptionally happy one. But there are memories—"

He turned away; the rich sunset hues dyeing the waves smote him from head to foot and cast his shadow from stem to stern along the deck.

"Ah! but you are a man," she sighed. "Thank you. I wish I could throw myself into anything, even astronomy and mathematics—I suspect the lower ones would be good enough for me."

"Next to religion," said Lord Sharland with the utmost sincerity, "mathematics are the greatest consolation for all human affliction—especially the higher branches. Many a lonely hour, many a sleepless night, has been cheered by the solution of some problem of number or measure. The comfort there is in logarithms! It is a pity that clergy-

men, as a rule, know so little of mathematics, otherwise they could recommend algebra and even common arithmetic as a resource in struggling with temptation. There was an extremely holy man once, who overcame the most dreadful temptations by computing the separate chances of every horse booked for the Derby, and arranging a betting-book accordingly."

"I did try the household accounts," Marcia humbly acknowledged ; "but though I kept them very carefully, they were not at all comforting, and in the last week at Youngwoods they grew more and more difficult and perplexing. They were comparatively easy till the trouble came and mixed them up. The butcher's bill used to spoil all. Butchers' bills always end in some pence halfpenny or farthing, owing to some subtle but immutable natural law."

"All natural laws are immutable, else they could not be laws," Lord Sharland corrected with severity.

"And when things end in odd pence half-penny or farthing, they have this curious effect, that the totals always come out dif-

ferent every time you cast the columns up. So that the oftener you cast the columns up the more incorrect the sum totals are. And that is not at all consoling, even if you are too happy to want consolation."

Sharland smiled, very slowly and gradually and gravely, until his face assumed an expression of tranquil benignity, as he gazed steadily through his glasses on the face of his young friend.

"I am glad you can talk like that, my dear," he said gently. "If you will kindly say some such impertinence every day, you will be conferring the greatest possible pleasure on me. But I am very sorry for your arithmetic. On what system were you taught, may one ask?"

"On the system of giving the least possible time and thought common decency demanded to a subject that nobody could teach and nobody wanted to learn."

"I will teach you myself. We will begin at once. No? Well, after coffee, then—but no; that will be the time for astronomy. Suppose, now, you make a firm resolution to master the art of navigation. And talk

freely to me of your feelings—and to Evelyn. May I not tell Evelyn? Not without your consent, of course. Now, did you ever read Emily Brontë's few strong poems? You remember 'that divinest anguish' that she held better than any pleasure imaginable? There is a luxury in sorrow, an intoxication of grief, a criminal self-indulgence in it.

"And even yet I dare not let it languish,
Dare not indulge in memory's rapturous pain;
Once drinking deep of that divinest anguish,
How could I seek the empty world again?"

Emily Brontë conquered herself; she turned away from the draught of 'divinest anguish' held to her lips. And—"

"—Died," Marcia added in a soft voice that startled him; "She did well. She was brave and strong."

CHAPTER IX

BLOOD UPON THE CLOVER

“Fear death?—to feel the fog in my throat,
 The mist in my face,
When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
 I am nearing the place,
The power of the night, the press of the storm
 The post of the foe;

“I was ever a fighter—so one fight more,
 The best and the last!”

THE four-leaved clover meanwhile, laid aside and forgotten, had travelled over sea not for the first time, nearer and ever nearer to the hot belt of the earth, till a day came when its new owner, dejected by excessive brain-work and sleeplessness, and depressed by increasing lassitude and fiery blasts from the desert, yielded to a sharp spasm of home-sickness and began to think tenderly of everything and everybody in England.

In this mood, which precludes serious

work, he sorted and arranged papers, destroyed all notes, plans and memoranda no longer needed, and re-read one or two letters from home. It was too hot to keep so much as a paper not absolutely necessary in the cabin ; the sea outside the open port-hole was soon snowed over with paper shreds, and presently the small envelope containing the clover and Marcia's three words was discovered and read.

Then the narrow, stifling cabin and the purple sea, over which glared a red and yellow western sky, vanished away and gave place to the green coolness of a mossy wood, the sweet breath of hyacinth and clover, and the freshness of May morning.

Once more Marcia stood beneath the green-leaved chestnut, with shining eyes and glowing face, carried away by the white fire of a pure and noble passion, saying that she was not ashamed to love him, and that she dared trust her surprised secret to his chivalry. Again the sunflecks slid over the graceful figure and sweet face ; again magical music rang in the moved voice that told the fairy tale of the clover and her love—the love she

could not regret, because it might one day be of service to him. He took the tiny packet out of that brief letter of "Good-bye and good luck," and for the first time examined the talisman this young woman had worn for eight years for love of him.

He found a dainty envelope of silver paper about an inch and a half square, enclosing a square of stiffer paper, to which the four heart-shaped leaves were attached by minute paper strips gummed across them. The clover was still green and showed dainty veinings of dark and light; it might have been gathered yesterday. On the reverse of the paper was written in an unformed hand: "June 2nd, 18—. Youngwoods. From H. B. For Luck."

A dim memory of having been in the neighbourhood at that date began to glimmer out of oblivion, with memories of dancing, not necessarily at Youngwoods, of young damsels innumerable, but of none in particular, not even of Mabel Tyndall, then too young to dance. It was the period of the once-loved woman's early ascendancy and just before their engagement.

There was something fascinating in the sight of this green ghost of a dead and forgotten summer, plucked from some forgotten field over which eight Junes had glowed and passed, and cherished all through those summers and winters in the heart of a young girl now grown to womanhood. She had looked up and "felt something flutter like a bird out of her breast." Poor child! To his mind that was very natural and very charming; but it ought to have passed with the roses of that summer, or at the first contact with actual life. Foolish child! But who is wise at seventeen? And who loves the wisdom of seventeen?

There must have been magic in the clover. Whole green fields of it, purpled with spiced bloom, waved in exquisite freshness before him; wild rose and honeysuckle mingled with its scent, and all the beauty of early English summer, bright with opening roses, musical with singing larks and murmuring surf and rustling leaves, and sweet with the innocence of country pleasures and the pure imaginings and simple grace of a maiden heart, breathed from it. It was well for her

that the long dream was broken at last, and that she could write those three sensible words, "Good-bye and good luck," and *nothing more*, in returning the talisman that had proved so unlucky for her. The dainty envelope was placed, for some unaccountable, mysterious reason, or no reason, doubled in a small gold locket containing the photograph of a woman habitually worn unseen ; the spasm of home-sickness had passed, charmed away by the cool green scenes conjured up by the sight of the clover ; the sudden Eastern night fell with exquisite cooling and restful shade ; on deck he watched great white stars throb through purple space, and foam and phosphorescence fall away from the vessel's track through the waves, musing on the adventure at Nutcombe Place, and the subtle charm in the voice of the woman who had loved him in silence for eight years, with deep refreshment of body and mind, resulting in a night of sweet sleep and pleasant dreams.

The command of such an expedition as this on the North-west frontier leaves little time for personal thoughts, so much more happily circumstanced are men than women. Ye

there are moments in the most active male lives when poor human nature, like a sleeping infant, wakes and cries for food. When such wakings occurred to Beaumont and his thoughts fled to friends and kin and England, they sometimes paused hoveringly over the Nutcombe chestnuts and the May morning idyll. At times they rested there until present need recalled them to action.

And when the mails yielded their contents to him, they brought a perpetual unacknowledged disappointment. He still looked for the handwriting on the clover, though he knew it could not be there, though he told himself it should not be there, though he held it base to ask, or even suggest, that it should be there.

Once a letter came in a handwriting that was used to quicken his pulse ; he did not observe that it had lost that power or that the perusal of it was hurried and without enjoyment. Nothing passes so imperceptibly as a dying passion ; the external form remains long after the lava flow has ceased, and when at last the crater itself falls in and subsides to the surrounding level, it has become too insignificant to attract notice.

As the expedition penetrated farther into the mountain fastnesses, communication with the civilised world became rarer and more spasmodic ; and even had mails pursued the little army with the relentless punctuality of civilisation, there would have been little time for reading their contents. Days spent in dragging guns by hand, or carrying them clasped in the arms, up precipitous heights, only to see them roll down again, or fall oneself from sheer exhaustion ; days spent in avoiding ambushes and resisting attacks, in storming fastnesses, and defending positions, in organising, commanding, and encouraging irregular troops of Orientals, in scouting and reconnoitring, in managing and parleying with wily and unscrupulous chieftains, in detecting the treacherous foe beneath the sheepskin of bland and obsequious vassalage, in obtaining supplies and shelter for a little army in a hostile and inhospitable country, in sparing the susceptibilities, and preventing the rivalries of subordinates, in faring scantily and roughly, lying hard and late, and rising before day in extremes of temperature, depressed by death of friends, shaken with

ague, fevered by wounds, and spent with toil ; such days leave scanty leisure for experiencing the finer and subtler shades of emotion.

That may be one reason why warfare is such a moral antiseptic for individuals and nations ; the blast of its fire-breath destroys the miasma of an atmosphere of stagnant luxury and artificiality, with one blow it throws men back upon natural and primary necessities, it wakes the primal, heroic virtues sleeping deeply beneath the soft coverings of civilised comfort, it rouses humanity from lyric dreams and pensive contemplation to prompt and epic action, to instant and epic self-devotion. A reaction follows ; the nation emerges purified and invigorated from the struggle ; great ideas born of its agony thrill along the pulses of its intellectual life ; the activity roused by stress of conflict echoes through its literature and philosophy, its political and social life. As with nations so with men ; metal can only be moulded only at fusion heat and by heavy hammering ; but fused metal sometimes bursts the mould in destructive outflow, the hammer sometimes

shatters the plate it is shaping, and men and armies and nations sometimes perish in the struggle for life.

Yet there were times of enforced inaction, even in this arduous life ; at night, when the bivouac beneath an open sky was too cold, too hard, or too comfortless for sleep, when the hours dragged wearily in wakefulness or broken slumber ; evening hours at the tent door or round the camp fire, when it was too dark to read or write, and serious conversation and desultory chat were alike impossible ; fever-fits, during which a burning or shivering body could but lie prostrate or restless ; hours of silent sheltering from approaching enemies or silent waiting behind defences for expected assaults ; hours of physical suffering and the mental depression that dogs responsibility. In such hours minds turn instinctively to all that makes life sweet, and the stoutest hearts succumb to that necessity for tenderness and affection which is one of the deepest instincts of humanity. In such moments the episode of the chestnut-tree would appear to Beaumont among comforting and cheering visions of home and friends, and it was pleasant to

know that the four-leaved clover was safe with the cherished portrait in its golden box. Strains of Wagner's music and scenes from his operas would sometimes echo through these empty hours made pleasant by melodious memories, and deprive them of that singular ache and heart-softening, not often confessed to by sturdy English, that Dante ascribes to the mariner at the sound of the evening bell, on "the day they have said farewell to sweet friends."

These mountain steeps, apparently so lifeless and deserted would often become alive unexpectedly with little puffs of smoke and flashes of fire that tumbled man or horse or both over the precipitous edge of the narrow ledges along which they were cautiously winding. Sometimes it would be a solitary natural bastion thus unpleasantly animated, sometimes a whole ridge of them; or when they were passing through a depression between hills the sides of a ravine would thus flash out in sudden, dropping death; in either case it was a nerve-destroying, exasperating ordeal.

Beaumont had in this way lost two horses,

escaping himself with bruises inseparable from a tumble ; once a bullet went through his helmet, another had taken the edge off an ear, another torn a boot, and yet another gone through his tunic, besides that which was known in England to have wounded him in the shoulder.

“ You must have some charm about you,” said the chief, commenting upon those close shaves ; “ or have you bathed in dragon’s blood, like your friend Siegfried ? ”

“ It’s a charm, which is better than dragon’s blood. The Siegfrieds and Achilles always had a vulnerable spot, and somebody always managed to hit it, don’t you know ? ”

They were near the end of their work ; tribe after tribe had submitted ; in a few days they reckoned to be at the capital of the great feudatory chief who had retreated before them, sending back, as he retreated, envoys with proposals of terms ; proposals growing daily humbler, but not humble enough to stay their advance on the royal city now visible in a fold of hills, whence it gleamed in sunshine like a jewel, as the English coiled round a mountain flank.

The rough road, overhung on one side by a sheer cliff, from which it was rudely hewn, wound along the side of a steep ravine, at the bottom of which a river ran with a distant, subdued roar and foam-flash. The road, which had long climbed the mountain, was just descending after one of those sudden turns that isolate the traveller, in space in sharp outline against the sky, when the expected plains outrolled in sunlight appeared in openings between mountains. Beaumont was riding forward alone, detached from any following, with a strong field-glass at his eyes, and rejoicing in the panorama unfolding before them, when he felt as it were a crashing blow from an invisible hand upon his shoulder, and shot headlong, horse and all, over the brink and down the rugged steep, down, down, from ledge to ledge, till he was lost to sight in the wood that lay like folds of drapery lower down the ravine above the rocky river-bed.

He had scarcely fallen before a rifle cracked, and from an apparently inaccessible projection above the road fell the slayer of the English commander, a dark, lithe moun-

taineer. The crushed body of Beaumont himself it was idle to think of finding, except after the descent by the road and a circuit to the river-bed, which was duly made by a search-party later; even then the chance of recovery was infinitesimal. In point of fact, as the chief regretfully stated in his despatch, that headlong dash down the river-gorge was the last they saw of their gallant second in command, the soul and heart and right arm of the expedition.

It was not the first time Beaumont had been shot by an unseen hand. When he went over the brink with his horse—which, though unwounded, was startled both by the shot and the rider's sudden unconscious pull on the bit as he overbalanced—he realised what had befallen him. He knew that the joyous glance with which he perceived those plains outrolled beneath the royal city, the goal of their advance, was his last look upon the goodly sunshine of this fair and pleasant earth. It was farewell to all—to joy and sorrow, hope and disappointment. The thought of a great labour well completed flashed through the dizzily turning brain in

that rapid rush down to destruction, with the thought of those who would mourn him ; two faces, one that of a keen-eyed man with a white moustache, the other that of a young woman with soft bright eyes, crossed his mental vision ; other faces circled confusedly round these, weeping and smiling, angry and kind ; lost faces rose in joy ; old scenes rushed by in bewildering rapidity ; the young green of chestnut-leaves was stirred by a woman's moved voice, then all merged in a great crash and blackness and vanished.

But death was not yet. The crash of that awful descent through space was dulled by the labyrinth of elastic boughs and leaves that received his body, bent under it, tossed it up and caught it again and lingeringly dropped it at last on a cushion of thick undergrowth, where it lay, still and pallid and bleeding, not very far from the poor horse, whose heavier body had struck on a rock with instant, merciful death.

Presently the darkness over Beaumont's brain divided and rolled away gradually in cloudlike eddies, with a sense of the passage of hours ; memory returned with the dis-

appearance of that last eddying blackness and booming in the head like the distant thunder of vanishing chariot-wheels. Pain came, the bullet-wound burnt, the whole body ached with the crash of the fall ; there was blood about, and no power to rise. He knew that it would be impossible for his own people to find him, even if they made the descent, took the long circuit afterwards and wound along by the river, which roared thunderously close by with maddening suggestion of the delight of water to a burning mouth and veins on fire. Would it take long to die, or would the darkness of unconsciousness close round with merciful quickness again ? It was a good death in spite of this solitary suffering on the brink, the parched lips moved in prayer ; peace filled the aching breast.

Up in the glimpse of sky showing through the boughs, a great bird was circling, the ghostly sound of its vast pinions was impressive ; was it a vulture ? There fell upon him deep longing for one friendly hand to clasp, one human face to look upon. "What, a soldier and afeard ?" Yet the sight of

that old soldier's kind, white-moustached face would be good, the touch of the hand that had taken the four-leaved shamrock sweet ; how gently that slender hand might be laid on his throbbing head, what tenderness would fill the shining eyes ! Scent of blue-bells and fresh verdure came ; now there was sweet woodruff ; now he saw a fresh young face pressed against the rough tree-trunk.

“If she love me, this beleeve,
I will die ere she shall grieve.”

Yet he had let her grieve. Was it right to disclose the bare and bitter truth ? As it turned out there would have been no time to discover the mistake. What folly to refuse the good gift of Heaven. How soon would this news be flashed home, and how would she feel it ? The old man at home—it was hard on him to lose three soldier sons. How pleasant to be alive and going home to a young and loving wife !

The hollow roar of the torrent deepened and blotted all from the brain. It passed slowly into music, sweet and solemn and restful, the sound of many voices in blended harmony, multitudes and multitudes, throngs

upon throngs, awful, innumerable, full of joy unutterable, in ever-deepening, ever-mounting floods of melody, above which surged and circled row upon row of faces and aureoles and up-pointing pinions, that floated away and away and were succeeded by others fading and passing in turn.

One stooped smiling from the circling faces and soaring wings ; he was a little child, looking up in the face of the mother bending over his pillow and melting into his dreams. The music sank, its volume lessened, its tenor changed ; it was a chorus from "Elijah," from "Tannhäuser" ; again the face stooped and floated back, and again ; now it was a younger, fairer face smiling and speaking— "And I felt something flutter like a bird out of my breast." The voice was sweet ; he was no longer a child. The river boomed softly below, a breeze rustled in the trees ; he knew that he was alone, dying, in the ravine. No one would bury him, she would never know how the clover lay with a mother's picture on a dead heart. Yet he saw her distinctly ; kneeling with folded hands and quiet face, praying for him out of

a heart made strong by a love that he felt holding him back securely from devouring floods of pain and death. All was clear, there was no illusion ; he heard the river roar, the vulture-wings clash.

Past things rose. Kind and patient father, how much you bore ! How much there was to regret ! follies, faults, mistakes. But all was over now. It grew dark and rapidly darker ; night had come at last and with it a great calm.

When the darkness rolled away once more and the thunder of departing chariot-wheels throbbed away to silence in his ears, he was lying on a rough bed within walls. Dark faces surrounded him, slender dark hands were giving him drink, voices were speaking in a guttural Eastern speech, half known, half guessed. He was a prisoner in the remote mountain eyrie of a petty chieftain. A long time seemed to have passed. His wounds were healing, the fever gone, but his strength was a young child's. Why had these wild people rescued him ? Was it for ransom, or in hope of information ? Everything had been taken from him with his clothing—arms,

watch, money, papers; nothing that he owned was in the bare room in which he lay, except the locket containing the portrait and the clover, which might have been considered as an amulet, and the gold of which, encrusted with dried blood, had excited no cupidity.

Thuja-ud-deen himself came to interrogate the wounded man, as soon as he was well enough to speak coherently; but it was long before Beaumont could gather either from the chieftain or any of his gaolers that he was being used as a sort of pawn in a diplomatic chess, and that innumerable negotiations were being carried on between Thuja and the British political agent concerning his safety, as an unknown Englishman who had been picked up, wounded, robbed and stripped, in the mountains. Thuja's present knowledge of his prisoner's name, far from hastening the negotiations, as Beaumont expected, retarded them, the chieftain demanding larger concessions for one of such rank and importance, and the agent thinking the personality of the prisoner invented by Thuja for purposes of extortion. For Beaumont, having been so palpably and thoroughly slain before the eyes

of so many witnesses, was not likely to be brought to life again on the evidence of a petty frontier chief, whose ways were too tortuous and intricate to permit a simple carrying out of a writ of *Habeas Corpus* to prove his captive's identity.

Those weeks of solitary imprisonment, enlivened by the capricious tyranny of half-savage gaolers, by tantalising expectations of ransom always balked, without books, letters, or any communication with the outer world, without exercise or fresh air, in much pain and long lingering sickness, in cold and in hunger, were anything but gay ; they offered much more leisure for thought and reflection than was pleasant ; they contained moments of despair, when even the charm of the clover would not work. The blood-stained locket was kept hidden and carefully dimmed lest it should excite the cupidity of the mountain men ; the glass had preserved the photograph from stain, but blood had penetrated by the clasp to the paper on which the clover was fixed, so that the inscription was illegible and the clover no longer green. And in those depressed and lonely moments, when

the clover itself seemed darkened to effacement by the blood upon it, again and again a voice had been distinctly heard through the silence, and a slender white hand had been reached out to him to pluck him back from ever-mounting waves of despondency. "It can do you no harm; it may do you good," he heard. He must be saved for such a love as that.

It was after such a bad moment, lit by such a flash of hope, that a scheme formed itself in his brain and was promptly acted upon. By careful and unobtrusive questions, the way to and its distance from the spot whence he fell was ascertained; great physical weakness was feigned, and, under a threat of dying in confinement, he was carried down to the courtyard of the little fort and thus enabled to observe and find out ways of getting in and out. Thuja being absent with a following and the bands of discipline loosened, the prisoner was missing one morning; nor was he discovered by the search party instantly sent out into the hills.

Two days later the British political agent, riding out in the morning, was accosted by a

gaunt, hunger-stricken man, in tattered native dress.

“How are you, Wilson?” was the tranquil English salutation of this nondescript being. “Any sport this morning? How much longer do you mean to leave me in the den of that old heathen, Thuja?”

“By the Lord!” cried the agent, looking aghast into the haggard face, darkened and turbaned and with a beard of some months’ growth; “you can’t be Beaumont. You can’t mean to say that the lying old beggar was speaking the truth after all.”

“I mean to say that I should like a cigar and a breakfast and a tub and some clothes and the news of the world,” was the reply, followed by the speaker’s sudden fall full length on the ground.

CHAPTER X

THE CLOVER RETURNED TO THE GIVER

“ How the world is made for each of us !
 How all we perceive and know in it
Tends to some moment’s product thus,
 When a soul declares itself—to wit,
By a fruit, the thing it does ! ”

THE morning was as sunny and calm as if no women’s hearts were breaking for gallant soldiers killed in fight. Marcia’s crushed spirit rose at the sea’s blue sparkle and fresh breath when she went on deck, but quickly fell again at the thought—the old thought—“ He saw and loved it, and will see and love it no more for ever.” She was turning dejected away to find her usual place, when she caught sight of a girl’s slender figure half concealed behind some hanging boats, and recognised the children’s young governess, her arms laid along the bulwarks, her head upon them, her face bent over the waves that ran rapidly

away from the side of the quick-scudding yacht; a slight movement of the shoulders and a very faint unmistakable sound betraying the fact she was trying to hide, that she was crying.

"Oh! it's nothing, Miss Ludlow," the poor child sobbed with sudden loss of self-control at the latter's sympathetic words; "only there's nowhere to have a good cry in on board a yacht."

"It's only," she added, as the gentle pressure of Marcia's arm round her invited confidence, "that I have to put off my holiday; and I did so want to go home soon, else I shan't see him again for another year."

"What do you teach those young imps, my dear? Perhaps I could do it for you. I believe we are going on to the East chiefly for my sake. Very likely he isn't worth crying for; but it's all the same."

"I am probably wronging my helpless offspring," Lord Sharland said, when, the case having been laid before him, the young governess had been put ashore and despatched overland to England with bright

eyes and glowing cheeks ; "but it will be the greatest benefit to Marcia to have something to do that must be done ; for, as you divined, Evelyn, she is suffering from some trouble of which I accidentally surprised the secret, and wants to be taken out of herself. She won't learn navigation, because she says the skipper and I can sail the boat very well without her help ; and, as nobody would be benefited by her learning astronomy, she won't learn that either. Women must be anchored to the concrete ; the abstract has no power on their peculiar class of intellect. But Heaven help the poor little wretches if she teaches them arithmetic ! "

Thus anchored to the concrete in the form of Gwenny and her little brother, Marcia diligently set herself to inform those youthful minds, according to the pattern set her by their instructress, for certain hours every day. After all it was something to hold on to without much exertion, either of mind or body, as long as it consisted in hearing repetitions and slowly-spelt-out reading exercises ; the trouble began in those awful and totally unexpected moments, when the

scholar, suddenly turning round and changing places, subjects the teacher to close and searching catechising—as to the manner in which Lady Jane Grey and Charles I. would appear at the Last Day; if without heads, how could they hear and speak? if without bodies, how rise?—whether Elijah was much burnt by the chariot of fire—who would bury the last man—if it had not been terribly dull in the Garden of Eden—if the devil was not greatly to be pitied—why people did not tumble off the earth when it turned round—who taught horses and dogs Italian and Greek—if mules and donkeys ever understood English—if the *Foam-bell* would stop when she came to the end of the world? This was fatiguing, more fatiguing even than the endless stories children want to hear and remember with such pitiless accuracy. So it soon became evident to onlookers that this amateur teaching was wearing sharper lines and darker shadows in Marcia's strained and wearied face, though she made no complaint and gallantly met the demands made upon her time and patience by her little friends. The education of those innocents was therefore

divided between their father and mother and French maid by the time the *Foam-bell* was cruising about the Archipelago.

Her host observed that, in spite of these efforts to get out of herself, her gowns daily sat looser upon her, and that her interest in things grew more and more forced and her hands more transparent. Yet she had no disease.

“ You have been much too good and I am an intolerable nuisance,” she said; “ so I think I had better go home as soon as we get back to some Christian starting-point. I am not ill, only stupid. If anything could rouse me it would be this coast.”

“ She’ll drift into a decline, Ernest,” Lady Sharland predicted.

“ No, she’ll right herself presently: she wants more rest; the sharp edge of grief is gone, it’s the exhaustion of an emotional convalescence.”

“ Still she is gay and bright when she speaks, but always with an effort. I wish she would tell *me* the trouble you accidentally discovered. You think it would be no relief to speak of it? Think she regrets your know-

ledge of it? Curious. It is always such a comfort to me to be able to tell things."

"Some things," he corrected, with the smile his wife termed wise.

But Marcia at this time, far from telling, scarcely even thought of her grief. She had passed through the first phases of an enduring sorrow that was slowly rooting itself in her heart—the shock, the sudden extinction of hope, the slow realisation of incredible pain, the secret, stealthy heart-bleeding, the exhaustion of a perpetual effort to conceal pain. Even the pathos and pity of fine powers wasted and a gallant life untimely quenched, the wild regret for what he might have done, the dread wonder and perpetual surmise as to the unprisoned spirit's actual state of being, the anxiety as to meeting again in the hereafter, with the continual ache of conflicting hopes and fears concerning the how, the why, and the where, and the deep, repeated searching and testing of lifelong grounds of security and belief involved by it, even this was ended now from sheer weariness; all emotion, and with it all power of thought, was laid in the trancelike sleep of exhaustion.

She was in that critical condition when a small physical or mental harm may be fatal, and only perfect tranquillity or some happy stimulus can restore to normal health. She no longer suffered. To lie still in a deck chair and watch the changes of sea and sky from dawn to sunset, to see purple and azure lines of headland and mountainous coast slowly drawn out in varying beauty before her ; here a picturesquely rigged vessel with lateen sails and curious prow, here a great steamer under a smoke trail, here a pleasure yacht, full winged, here the swoop and cry of a sea-bird, there the plunge of porpoises, and always the ripple and wash of waves, the wind's varied song in cordage and canvas, voices of the crew and the children at play, song of fishers borne on the breeze—all soothed her and hushed thought and memory to peace.

Those were halcyon days of breeze-rippled calm ; but the stormy days had their healing charm as well, when green mountains capped with rolling foam rose round the yacht and crashed upon her, or shrieking winds volleyed cutting rains at her, when masts bent, sails

cracked like shots, all hands were at work in what seemed wild confusion of shouting, and heavy seas came plunging over the decks with crash and rattle of things carried away in the plunge. Days especially charming if it were still possible to remain on deck, securely lashed and tarpaulined, as sometimes happened.

In these Mediterranean days, the sleep so long denied came easily and often, and was not lightly broken by the turmoil of hurrying feet, the clank of chain and cable, the roar of surf on headland and reef, the howl of tempest or any sea noise. Sleep seemed the one blessing, the sole desire of life, to be secured at any price. The husband and wife, and sometimes the children, went ashore here and there, though they avoided letters and newspapers, thus accomplishing Sharland's purposes of study and retreat from the world; but the guest remained on board, lulled by the yacht's slight rocking, the sights and sounds of harbour and bay, and little glimpses of shore life that came now and then. The book usually in hand as a pretext for silent occupation, was often unopened, seldom read; the correspondence collected in earlier days

of the cruise from given *postes restantes* had been undesired and leisurely investigated.

So that one evening, when Sharland returned from a day ashore with his wife near Alexandria, and said with suppressed excitement and glittering eyes that he brought her something she would like, she smiled with an effort, and thanked him politely for the letters he laid on her lap, his strong brown hand perceptibly quivering as he did it, but she made no attempt to open them. For what could interest her now? Or what could she desire but rest to fit her for the duties of life?

"A pity to let your news be blown away," he said drily. "Think of the variety of effort that has brought those little packets over land and sea to you. Of course we've had a pleasant day, thanks. There goes Evelyn crying down the companion as proof. That's my wife's notion of happiness—a good solid cry. She won't be fit to look at all the evening."

Marcia smiled. "All the fitter for the cry," she said. "She cries so becomingly and enjoys it so thoroughly."

Then she glanced at the uppermost letter, which, like the whole consignment, had been

laid face downwards, her face darkening at the sight of Borman's neat and clever script. How dared he address her? What fresh devilry could even his fertile malignity devise? Yet she opened it and read, while Sharland paced the deck behind her, occasionally turning to take a quick glance at her and whistling softly, as if to persuade himself that he was quite at ease.

"Perhaps I am, as you say, a 'hideously cruel man,'" she read. "I certainly do not pretend to be a saint, and things that stand in my way fare ill at my hands. I said that I should not forget the dog business, and I did not. I made accounts between us more than even. Yet, though you had on the whole the best of it, I regretted and still regret it, and would give a good deal not to have done it. You are the only woman I ever did, or ever shall, deeply love. I could do anything almost to make you happy, though I know that you never will or can care for me and would be wretched as my wife. You are the only woman I ever found worthy of real respect. Do you think, then, that I could have invented such a telegram as that

I sent you? Long before this you will have been certified of the injustice of your imputation and know that my 'hideous cruelty' was but the amiable weakness of wishing to be the first to tell you what I thought would give you deep and sincere pleasure. I happened to be at the War Office when the news came, and telegraphed at once. I cannot ask you to forgive what I cannot (and I am not squeamish) forgive myself. I must have been mad with jealousy and disappointed desire. Yet you may, and probably will, have reason to be very thankful for the letter that took you to the chestnut-tree that morning. Dogs and other beasts may have reason to be thankful for what you did one winter afternoon. I'll never hit harder than necessary for your sake, Marcia Ludlow, so do not think more hardly than you can help of

"Yours most sincerely,

"NORRIS BORMAN."

It was like a dream: the letter implied what was impossible to believe for pure joy. She looked up, bewildered and wondering, to observe an unusual expression on the face of

Sharland, which confirmed the wild delirious hope quivering through her. He smiled and bid her read through her letters, so she took up the next, seeing the first erased address through a maze of subsequent addresses and postmarks with a startled cry. The yacht spun round, the masts in the harbour eddied and the shore-lines rose and fell like storm-waves ; there was a sound of many bells and rushing water in her ears. For it was Beaumont's own exquisite handwriting this time, neat and delicate, but firm and forcible and full of intellect, with those characteristic M's, a writing that could not be imitated—at all events, by such as Borman. She looked long with tear-blinded eyes at the travel-stained frayed envelope, that had followed her over the world—it must have crossed her on its way home—to Youngwoods, whence it had leisurely pursued the *Foam-bell* from point to point.

“ I'll never take any one out of reach of letters again,” stammered Sharland. “ To think of what has been waiting for you, while I was taking holiday from letter-bags and newspapers ! ”

It was long before her shaking hands could open it, longer before the words of it, still longer before the sense of it, became clear to her. She read as follows :

“ DEAREST Miss LUDLOW,—I have just escaped and hasten to tell you that the last few months have been passed in the den of a marauding chief, one Thuja-ud-deen. The luck of the clover prevailed. Though wounded, stripped and left for dead, I kept it all through. Stained and unrecognisable, it has been the greatest comfort to me under uncomfortable circumstances. It brought exquisite memories and inspired great hopes. The thought of the giver was never absent. I scarcely like to worry you to write, but it would be a relief to hear that you are well.

“ Always yours,

“ HUGH BEAUMONT.”

When Sharland was pacing the deck late that evening with a cigar, Marcia joined him. Her face, in the light of the clear night sky of the East, was radiant with a grave and peaceful joy, her step light and joyous.

"I want you to tell Evelyn," she said, "and ask her to say nothing."

"It shall be done."

"And tell her this—" with a long pause: "He never cared for me. It was only a little friendship on his side."

"Oh, come; are you sure?" he asked, with lifted eyebrows.

"A great deal too sure," was the reply; and then, all of a sudden, to Marcia's own intense surprise, as well as that of her courteous auditor, out rushed the whole story of the four-leaved clover, to the point of its changing hands on Beaumont's departure for India.

"Of course I shall obey your commands and tell my wife," he said, when she left him; "but she will be furious with jealousy and I shall never be forgiven. The peace of a happy and blameless hearth will be destroyed because I knew the story before she did, so that she can't enjoy telling me."

"I suppose I should have told her myself to-night if she had not turned in so early," Marcia replied. "I cannot keep it in to-night. My heart is too full—under these

stars too, and in all this mysterious beauty of sea and dark shores and harbour lights and—everything. By daylight—or lamplight—or in the saloon—it is so different. And you know so much and have been so very, very kind, it would have been disingenuous not to tell you all. I could not leave you with half a story and under a false impression, dear Lord Sharland."

"He has nothing and she has nothing and they have no expectations," was Lady Sharland's gloomy comment after hearing the story, "so no doubt they will marry without delay."

"The catastrophe seems inevitable, my dear, but not imminent. Beaumont has yet to recover and come home. I wonder that you have received no personal intimation of your cousin's escape."

"It must have been in the papers—therefore unnecessary to tell. The papers told the death. Cousin Hugh *père* ought to have been congratulated. I'll write to him by the first opportunity. I always liked Marcia, now I love her. I wonder—how much—would make it possible for them to marry?"

Dearest, you are the most generous of men——”

“I knew it, I knew it,” he groaned ; “I knew it was coming, knew what was expected of me. When I’m ‘the most generous of men,’ it means at least four figures. You daughter of the horse-leep, can’t you be content with wasting the substance, ruining the temper, and destroying the domestic comfort of one miserable man, but you must put the neck of every freeborn bachelor you can find under the yoke of a similar slavery ?”

“No, darling, I can’t. I’m so utterly wretched myself that I want to reduce all my best friends to the same level of misery. Hubert has influence with the authorities. So has George Orpen—and the Duke of Wilmington. The Duke is a connection through my great grandmother. George would love to borrow the *Foam-bell*. Your brother is always——”

“—A prey to my wife’s rapacity. Let me tell you, madam, that worms turn, even the crushed reptile whose name you bear. Luckily—for me—all this is a long way off,

too should pass, though that of which they are but the faint and inefficient symbol can never pass while the soul lives. In this great joy, which had something of the breathlessness of sudden deliverance from deadly peril, there was no room to think how much his letter might mean ; how strong, or deep, or tender his thoughts of her during suffering and captivity might have been. Only to have been a source of comfort and solace in that long and lonely captivity seemed enough happiness for a lifetime in these first days of new-born gladness.

The may was again white on hedge and thorn-tree, the sky had again taken on that wonderful blue clarity peculiar to the month when “ clouds are highest up in air ” and the whole earth laughs with the careless gladness of youth. And on one of these mornings Lady Sharland agreed as follows : “ We will have luncheon in the summer-house, and Marcia shall make *Maientrank* for us. The children will gather sweet woodruff, and I will bring the hock—ought it to be still or sparkling ?—and Marcia shall take the bowl and spices and things, and your lordship

shall carry the literature and needlework for the afternoon's recreation—in short, we'll go a-maying."

"Suffering," sighed the devoted husband, "is the law of man's nature—when married. If we had no houses to eat and study in, and no servants to prepare our food, and no Christian wine to drink, people would pity us; we should certainly pity ourselves. My wife, Marcia, would consider herself an ill-used drudge, and probably suffer me to enjoy cold water in its unmitigated severity, unless she despatched poor Gwenny to the nearest tap with twopence, a box on the ear, and a cracked jug, for beer. As it is, we leave a comfortable and weather-tight home—we possess at least seven—to tramp, laden with household utensils, immense distances under a burning sun; our guests are made to do duty as transport and commissariat corps; our helpless children are forced to pick noxious weeds in viper-haunted ditches to poison excellent wine with; while we try to prepare with our own incapable hands a wretched meal in a damp, tumbledown shed, full of spiders, toads and earwigs——"

him to offer himself then. Before long she might meet him—Jack had seen him and written rapturously to tell her; she must be very careful and guarded. He had suffered so much both in body and mind that he was scarcely yet master of his feelings. What he had written to her since his escape was not to be taken literally. In his solitude and misery, the thought of one whose strong feeling for him was known had naturally been a solace. When he had quite recovered, and was amongst friends again, all would be different, things would regain their right proportion. To this effect she had written to him. He was chivalrous and large-hearted, eager to persuade himself that his friendship meant something warmer. His chivalry and generosity should never be abused. It would be wiser to avoid him and put on a cold manner at first. Wisdom is not always pleasant: she would have to be firm and stern with herself, for it seemed just now as if only one thing in the world was worth having, namely, to see him once again, just once and instantly, just there in the sunshine where he stood a year ago.

Is there witchery in wishing, or can strong desire, if strong enough, draw souls and bodies within its sphere? There was a quick rustle of dead leaves behind the chestnut, two light quick steps before it, the spoken word "Marcia," bringing her to her feet with a faint cry and a singing in the ears, and the figure was there, as desired, beneath the bough—no vision, but the living, breathing figure of Hugh Beaumont.

What followed she never clearly knew ; Beaumont knew and remembered not uncheerfully ; a nightingale, sitting silent in the green covert, knew and sang it all later to the stars ; the blithe sunshine stealing through an opening behind the tree made but one shadow of the two figures.

Soon they were sitting as a year ago when she first learnt that the letter was false, Marcia on the block of wood, Beaumont on the root-spur facing her, both silent and both trembling. She was still thin and pale and fragile-looking, not at all as he had first known her, while her poor war-worn hero was scarred, wasted, and hollow-eyed, with a sprinkle of grey in his hair and a limp in

his gait. But in his eyes she saw something new that was at once agitating and calming.

“Are you really well again?” he asked, taking stock of the changes in the face that had so long been before his mind. “Ah, my dear, that was a blow, when I called at Youngwoods scarcely able to crawl, and drove under the trees where we walked in the moonlight, and heard you were ill, and very ill and far away.”

“Quite well. Only think. Lord Sharland sat there, where you are, last October, and told me—to break it to Evelyn. He had the paper and read it out. And that was rather a blow.”

“My dear, my dear! I never felt anything like this before—for any one—never. Here is the clover, Marcia, and this was my mother.” He laid the locket open in her lap, she turned white and sick to see the dark stain upon it.

In reply to her faltering questions she heard that he had been a good deal knocked about by the shot and the tumble—a bullet in the lung, a few broken ribs and leg had been

among the injuries. "I shall always wear the clover," he said, "in spite of its gruesome look; for it brought me luck—you are my luck: the blood that stained it gave me time to think of that great good luck and weigh its worth. I didn't think it was in me to feel as I do for you. Once they talked of putting me to the torture, and one of them, out of friendship, told me, and left me—a draught. I was very weak and desperate, but the thought of you kept me."

"Was there no higher thought?" she asked with brimming eyes.

"Not that night, not till the next morning."

She kissed the clover; he returned it to its place and laid a morocco case on her lap.

"With my love," he said.

She opened it, finding no golden gaud, no jewelled female trinket within, only a metal cross, "For Valour." She thought of the price given for it, and recognised that it was the best he had to give; then, looking into the grave dark eyes sweet with tenderness

and deep with intellect, realised that she had won no common nature and no ignoble love. The clover visibly dyed with his blood was invisibly steeped in that of her own deep and silent suffering : his feeling for her, however slight in its origin, had grown and thriven and become rooted and unshakable in the great suffering, moral and physical, through which he had passed. The love of both had been exalted and purified by pain strong enough to bring each down to the valley of the shadow of death ; such a love could neither change nor die. His love-gift was nothing less than the Victoria Cross, bought at the price English soldiers know so well how to pay, and pay so often without buying it.

“Oh, Hugh,” she cried, her eyes suddenly blinded with exquisite tears, “Hugh!”

“The giver with the gift,” he said ; “the best I have and all I am. It is but a poor offering for such as you, but take it, dearest, and make it of worth. You are not afraid of poverty ? I am virtually without means. I shall always be a poor man.”

"What is poverty? I have next to nothing myself. You would make any woman rich."

"Ah, my dear; if I could make *you* rich in any sense, I would turn my hand to any honest work. But I ought to tell you this, Marcia: you know that I was a good deal knocked about—I may never again be fit for service. I—"

"Oh, but you shall, you shall," she cried in her impetuous way, her cheek pressed to his. "You shall rest and grow strong. I will nurse you well, I will love you well. Oh, you will be fit and strong again. And if not—"

"Would you still take the useless old crock? It's not fair; and you are so fragile, you poor, dear child. You were very ill, they said."

"Can't you think why? Can't you fancy what it must have been all those months?" she asked, smiling down into his eyes.

"Marcia! I'm not worth this. I used to think you were praying for me, my dear. It pulled me through. I held on for you. I

was kept for your sake. I will live for your sake. How could I live without you?"

The scent of bluebells, fast-fading may and cowslips grew sharper, wood-shadows deeper, the ever-changing sunbeams raining through young leaves softer and yellower, the distant glimpse of sea-blue more bloomy, before they left the chestnut's pleasant and friendly shade, and wondered if that old man was cutting trefoil again, or if the whole May-day charm and sweetness was but a dream to be shattered soon to grey reality.

When, some months later, Marcia stood with Hugh in the chancel of Nutcombe Church, where she had heard his funeral sermon preached and Chopin's *Marche Funèbre* played for him, the bride was in the bloom and beauty of health, the bride-groom's tall figure was straight and strong, his brown, scarred face full of life. The old man who cut the trefoil waited outside in the churchyard to see the wedding pass and wish them good luck.

Jack Tyndall, the groomsman, to whom

Marcia had related the history of the clover, wore the emblem, which seemed to suit with Beaumont's Irish descent. Shamrocks or clovers were embroidered on the wedding gown and veil and wrought into the green and white dresses of little Lord Amberwood and tiny Lady Gwenny and a little niece of the bride's, who constituted her retinue at this simple wedding.

The same emblem in emeralds set with brilliants sparkled in a bracelet, the gift of Norris Borman, who regretted to be unable—owing to pressing engagements connected with his being under orders for Egypt—to accept the invitation to the wedding. It was embroidered by Lady Sharland in silk and gold on a Russia leather pocket-book containing papers from her husband of the value foreboded by him in the Mediterranean; it formed the design of a simple brooch with brilliants from Willoughby, who had owned his part in the forgery, but not in the eavesdropping, and been forgiven.

“It was vile,” Beaumont commented on hearing of those confessions from Marcia,

“but the best luck I ever had. It all came from your defence of the dog. Without that we might have missed the luck of the four-leaved clover.”

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